

**CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS OF VIETNAM
VETERANS**

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I. LISTEN, I'VE *BEEEN* IN VIETNAM

I. LISTEN, I'VE *BEEEN* IN VIETNAM - The Vietnam War in Autobiographical Writings of Vietnam Veterans¹

I.1. WELCOME TO THE WAR – Introduction²

“I was the perfect age to participate in Vietnam and I didn’t want to miss it [...]” - “I really believed in my country [...]” - “I was scared shitless.” - “I was one mean motherfucker.” - “I cried inside the whole time.” - “I really loved fucking killing [...]” - “I couldn’t believe Americans could do things like that to a human being ...” - “I thought I would come home as a war hero [...]” - “I felt so much like I didn’t belong in America.” - “I went against the grain of who I thought I was.” - “I look back today, and I’m horrified at what I turned into.”³

The various voices of the Vietnam veterans presented in the pastiche above provide an initial impression of the range of experiences and the self-perceptions “Vietnam” meant for American soldiers who went to war in the small Southeast Asian country.⁴ Often deeply affected by what they saw and what they did, many of the young men and women came back to the United States feeling disconnected from their pre-war selves, distanced from their families and friends, and disoriented in the oddly unfamiliar, sometimes even hostile American society.⁵ Reintegration and return to a normal and productive life often proved difficult for the soldiers: many veterans suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)⁶ or other war-related psychological or physiological illnesses. Moreover, the conduct and outcome of

¹ The title quote is taken from Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die* 66.

² The quote is borrowed from Santoli 3.

³ The words of Vietnam veterans are taken from: Baker 7, 9, 43, Santoli 110, Shay 78, 31, Baker 192, 190, 194, 131, Shay 33.

⁴ Throughout this study, I use the term “America” to denote the United States and her colonial predecessors.

⁵ Several studies dealt with the readjustment of Vietnam veterans. The most influential studies were Frey-Wouters’ and Laufer’s *Legacy of a War* from 1986, and Kulka, Schlenger, Fairbank, et al., *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation* from 1990.

⁶ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is one of the most common illnesses triggered by the war experience. The official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association names five criteria for the diagnosis of PTSD: “A. The person has experienced an event that is outside the range of usual human experience and that would be markedly distressing to almost everyone [...]. B. The traumatic event is persistently reexperienced [...]. C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma or numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma) [...] D. Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma) [...]. E. Duration of the disturbance (symptoms in B, C, and D) of at least one month.” Quoted from Shay 166-167. About 70% of male Vietnam combat veterans suffered from at least one of the symptoms. About 35.8% met all the criteria. Shay 168.

America's longest war had raised difficult moral as well as military and political questions and produced deep fissures in the fabric of American society. Especially after the disclosure of atrocities committed by American troops in the late Sixties and early Seventies veterans were abused as "baby-killers" and condemned as morally derelict. The public view of the veterans changed during the late Seventies and early Eighties mainly because of the rise of the "New Right" headed by President Reagan, of *Rambo*, and because of the successful research and recognition concerning the psychological problems Vietnam veterans suffered from.⁷ The victory in the Gulf War in 1991 brought the reinterpretation of the Vietnam war to a consensual close and finally reconstructed America's "lost identity of triumph." (Englehard 14-15)⁸ Vietnam veterans are now regarded as the only authoritative and authentic narrators of America's Vietnam war experience, legitimated by the participation in the war. Keith Beattie argues that the Vietnam war was defined as unique; consequently, a form of representation was needed which was able to reveal the 'truth' of this unique experience. Conventional history books, written by non-participants of the war, were deemed insufficient to this task. Only war participants were seen as being able to represent the war experiences truthfully. "The outcome of the interrelated set of assumptions was that the male veteran's experience of the war in Vietnam positioned him as the sole legitimate domestic spokesperson of the essential truth of the war." (7-8)⁹

The present study is concerned with the autobiographical literature of the Vietnam war. My study focuses primarily on the question how the respective author reconstructs his or her personal identity in the autobiographical text. In this introductory chapter I will first present the four autobiographies I have selected as case studies. After that, terms that are central to my argument such as "autobiography," "identity," and "self," will be defined and distinguished from each

⁷ See chapter II.3 of this study.

⁸ Tom Engelhard argues that "Vietnam marked a definitive exit-point in American history and the 1960s, a sharp break with the past. [...] It is hardly surprising that, after 1975, the basic impulse of America's political and military leaders (as well as of many other Americans) was not to forge an new relationship to the world but to reconstruct a lost identity of triumph." 14-15. See also Buzzanco 8.

⁹ For a overview of the European perspectives on the Vietnam war see Mausbach.

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other to avoid ambivalence and misunderstandings. After a brief discussion of the autobiographical genre for the construction of identity, I will give a short outline of the structure of this book.

Selected Texts

I have selected autobiographical accounts – two by male and two by female Vietnam veterans – as case studies: Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (first edition 1973), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* (1983), and Winnie Smith's *American Daughter Gone to War* (1992). In order to be able to focus on a single comparandum – gender - it was necessary to select autobiographies written by authors who belong to the same ethnic community and class.¹⁰ The four texts are written by white middle-class American soldiers who served with the Army in Vietnam between 1964 and 1973. Thus, all authors have a similar cultural and military background. The authors are not representative for Vietnam veterans in general: The majority of soldiers who served in Vietnam were working-class and African-American men, and only one out of seven was a member of a line unit. (Bates, *Wars* 18, Appy 6-36)¹¹ However, the authors discussed in the present study are representative of Vietnam autobiographers, since the greatest number of autobiographies is written by white, middle-class soldiers who saw combat.¹²

The four selected texts belong to the sub-genre of military autobiography.¹³ This kind of autobiographical narrative is defined as “consisting of those continuous nonfictional personal narratives that present a life lived largely in or around professional military service; that include a short-time military experience as an important element of a life otherwise not spent in or around the military; or that recount experiences of military life other than war.” (Vernon 603) O'Brien's and

¹⁰ I understand “gender”, in contrast to the biologically defined “sex” of a person, as a category containing the “Bedeutung(en), die eine Kultur der Unterscheidung zwischen Mann und Frau verleiht und die sich mit anderen grundlegenden Sinnstiftungen überlagern bzw. sie stabilisieren kann.” (Feldmann/Schülting 184)

¹¹ See also chapter II.2. of this study.

¹² See chapter II.4. of the present study.

¹³ Throughout this study I use the term “genre” not to denote the classical “Naturformen der Poesie” poetry, drama, and narrative prose, but in a wider sense as “Dichtarten [...] als Unterteilung der eigentlichen Grund-Gattungen.” (Wilpert 290-291)

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especially Caputo's accounts, moreover, belong to the sub-category of "autobiographical war writings" which "rarely stray from the battlefield" and contain only limited discussions of the writer's life before or after the war. (Vernon 603) Tim O'Brien, a reluctant draftee, served as an infantry soldier in Vietnam in 1969-1970 in the infamous My Lai area. Philip Caputo, in contrast, eagerly joined the Marine Corps and went to Vietnam as a lieutenant in 1965-1966 with the first combat troops sent overseas. Both authors focus on their experiences in the military and in the war. They only briefly describe their childhood and youth and do not deal with their life after Vietnam at all. Both veterans have become professional writers and journalists.

O'Brien's and Caputo's works are distinguished from the majority of autobiographies by their literary qualities. Philip Beidler praises *If I Die* as

[o]ne of the exemplary works of his kind to emerge from the experience [...], it recalls both in its own profound humanity and its distinctly literary quality of aspiration toward some large and perhaps enduring significance, the depictions of men at war by Whitman, Melville, Crane, and Hemingway; and it stands at the same time, it is not too much to say, in the central tradition [sic] American spiritual autobiography as well, the tradition of Edwards and Woolman, of Franklin and Thoreau and Adams. (*American Literature* 99)

Caputo's narrative, Jeffrey Walsh judges, belongs - besides Michael Herr's new journalism account *Dispatches* - "to the two books most likely to become classics." (*American War Literature* 199) Beidler states that as "a war memoir [*A Rumor of War*] speaks with an experimental authority unparalleled save in comparable works about Vietnam by O'Brien, Kovic, and perhaps a few others and an authority that also places it in the larger myth-literature of war *as experience* [...]." At the same time, Caputo's narrative also has to be regarded as "a major study itself of war memoirs and the reporting of war as it relates to the forms and processes of cultural mythmaking at large." (*Re-Writing America* 39) Myers compares both O'Brien's and Caputo's autobiographies and concludes about their shared qualities:

Intensely personal and allusive, broodingly and brutally honest, both works conduct tests of preexisting myths as forms of confession, means to offer individual guilt and expiation as small models for collective peripeteia and catharsis. Neither work claims to be more than one person's story; both achieve a synchrony of individual and national tragic knowledge rare in either the novel or the personal narrative of the war. Like O'Brien, Caputo creates a carefully

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modulated narrative voice that describes implicitly its own development as American symbolic action of the most significant kind. (89)

In contrast to O'Brien and Caputo, Van Devanter and Smith are not professional writers. For both, their respective autobiographies are their only books to date. This difference will certainly become evident in the analyses. But since the main focus of this study is on the formation of personal identity rather than on the literary quality of the texts, it will only add another dimension to my project, not render the comparison meaningless.

As all female military personnel, Lynda Van Devanter and Winnie Smith joined the Army Nurse Corps voluntarily, and both women requested orders for duty in Vietnam. Lynda Van Devanter served her tour in two different Evacuation Hospitals from 1968 through 1969 as an operating room nurse. Winnie Smith went to Vietnam from 1966 through 1967. She served first in a Saigon Army hospital, then on the neurosurgical ward of an Evacuation Hospital. In contrast to O'Brien and Caputo, both female autobiographers also describe their lives before and after the war. For some years after the war, both Van Devanter and Smith continued nursing in stateside civilian hospitals after they had left the army. Both women suffered from the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Both stopped working in nursing eventually. Both went through a period of therapy, and learned to deal with their experiences. Van Devanter studied psychology and founded the women's branch of the Vietnam Veterans of America. She became a professional lobbyist for women veterans' rights. Smith left the nursing profession in the early Eighties to study geography.

The overwhelming majority of veteran's autobiographies are written by male combat soldiers. Only few women's voices, as Carol Mithers argues,

have been heard in the history of any war. That is not because [women] haven't been present in those wars, haven't suffered and died. Women were found among the slain at Waterloo, women served as seamstresses, spies, and soldiers during the American Revolutionary War, and as nurses during the American Civil War. [...] Sixty-seven Army nurses survived the defeats of Bataan and Corregidor and spent nearly three years in a Japanese POW camp in the Philippines. Army nurse Genevieve de Galand spent weeks stranded in the French garrison during the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the only woman and nurse to care for the 6,000 soldiers wounded and killed. Eight American women died in Vietnam [...] (81)

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Aside from Van Devanter's and Smith's books only three more autobiographies have been written by female veterans: Lynn Hampton's *The Fighting Strength* (1990), Sharon Grant Wildwind's *Dreams that Blister Sleep* (1999), and Mary Powell's *A World of Hurt* (2000). Despite the fact that women also served in other than medical capacities in Vietnam, in literature the nurse's war experience is dominant, since all five women served as nurses in Vietnam. While Van Devanter's and Smith's accounts are conventional autobiographies, Wildwind's takes the form of a diary, Hampton's book resembles a religious conversion narrative. Powell's account combines her own story with those of seven of her male and female fellow soldiers in Vietnam.¹⁴ Only in recent years have scholars begun to pay attention to female war experiences and women's stories of war have become part of the Vietnam war's legacy.¹⁵ Out of the five autobiographies by female veterans, two have appeared in the last five years, and Van Devanter's autobiographical account *Home Before Morning* has been re-issued by the renowned University of Massachusetts Press in 2001.

Autobiography

Autobiographies belong to the group of 'factual' or non-fictional texts. Scheffel and Martinez define "faktuale Texte" as follows: "Faktuale Texte sind Teil einer realen Kommunikationssituation, in der das reale Schreiben eines realen Autors einen Text produziert, der aus Sätzen besteht, die von einem realen Leser gelesen und als tatsächliche Behauptung des Autors verstanden werden." In contrast, fictional¹⁶ texts

sind ebenfalls Teil einer realen Kommunikationssituation, in der ein realer Autor Sätze produziert, die von einem realen Leser gelesen werden. Fiktionale Texte sind jedoch komplexer als faktuale, weil sie außer der realen noch einer zweiten, imaginären Kommunikationssituation angehören.

¹⁴ Her book thus resembles Ronald Glasser's account from 1971. Glasser served as an Army doctor at Camp Zama, Japan, and dealt with the wounded soldiers evacuated from the hospitals in Vietnam. He tells not only his own story, but also those of many soldiers he met during his tour of duty.

¹⁵ For an overview see Rogan. A few anthologies collect women's war writing from the First and Second World War: Smith, *Women's Writing of the First World War*, Higonnet, *Lines of Fire*, and Cardinal. Other books deal with women in the armed forces: Higonnet/Jensen, Merryman, Garvin, Meyer, Poulos and Schneider/Schneider. A collection of letters by women serving in the Second World War is provided by Litoff/Smith. With the special experiences of African-American women in war deal Morehouse and Honey. All books appeared between 1981 and 2000.

¹⁶ In the present study, I use the term 'fiction' as "Bezeichnung für den erfundenen bzw. Imaginären Charakter der in literarischen Texten dargestellten Welten." (Barsch 149). 'Fictional' and 'fictitious' means, following Martinez/Scheffel: "Fiktionale Rede steht im Gegensatz zu 'faktual' bzw. 'authentisch' und bezeichnet den Status einer Rede. [...] Fiktiv steht im Gegensatz zu 'real' und bezeichnet den ontologischen Status des in dieser Rede Ausgesagten." (13)

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Die fiktionale Erzählung richtet sich sowohl im imaginären als auch im realen Kontext an einen Leser und stellt daher eine 'kommunizierte Kommunikation' dar [...]. (17)

Consequently, the difference between factual and fictional text can be defined as follows: “Die Werke der Dichter sind fiktional in dem Sinne, daß sie grundsätzlich keinen Anspruch auf unmittelbare Referentialisierbarkeit, d.h. Verwurzelung in einem empirisch-wirklichen Geschehen erheben; wovon sie handeln, das ist – mehr oder minder – fiktiv, aber nicht fingiert.” (Scheffel/Martinez 13).¹⁷ Fictionality, nevertheless, is a question of perceptio, texts are not fictional *per se* (Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion* 154). Certain “signposts of fictionality” (Cohn, “Signposts” 109) serve as markers for the fictional character of a text. Nünning argues that they can be divided into three groups. The first group of signposts are the contextual signals: the communication situation, the publishing house, the external design of a book. The second and larger group of signposts consist of the paratextual signals like title, subtitle, chapter structure, or the generic categorization of the text.¹⁸ The third group, the textual elements, consists of deictic elements: “‘nicht konkret referentialisierbare Angaben über Personen, Ort und Zeit’, ein hohes Maß an Mehrdeutigkeit” as well as “die Gesamtheit jeder Darstellungsverfahren, die als spezifisch literarisch gelten (wie rhetorische Figuren, Formen der Bewußtseinsdarstellung etc.) [...]” (*Von historischer Fiktion* 155). A similar list of “Wirklichkeitssignale[n]” (Kosellek 285) is still to be desired.¹⁹ As Nünning argues, deictic elements are especially important for the differentiation between fictional and factual texts because “[i]m Falle von nicht-fiktionalen Texten stellen eindeutig referentialisierbare Zeitangaben, Orts- und Personennamen einen konkreten Wirklichkeitsbezug her, durch den die Authentizität der Aussagen [...] postuliert werden.” (*Von historischer Fiktion* 156).

¹⁷ Similar: Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion* 153.

¹⁸ The term “paratext” is discussed in Gerard Genette's works *Palimpseste* and *Seuils*. He defined it as “zone indéfinie entre le dedans et le dehors.” (*Seuils* 8). Following Stolz, I would argue that the paratextual elements belong to the text itself, to the “dedans” and not to the “dehors”. (211f.) See also Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion* 157.

¹⁹ See Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion* 153.

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Autobiography is basically defined as follows: “Rückblickende Prosaerzählung einer tatsächlichen Person über ihre eigene Existenz, wenn sie den Nachdruck auf ihr persönliches Leben und insbesondere auf die Geschichte ihrer Persönlichkeit legt.” (Lejeune, *Pakt* 14) Despite the fact that there have been autobiographical texts since classical times, the term was used for the first time in 1809 by poet Robert Southey.²⁰ Renate Schmidt-Von Bardeleben names four features which further define autobiography and distinguish it from related non-fictional and fictional forms like memoirs, diaries, the *bildungsroman* or the quasi-autobiographical novel: First: the autobiographer's intention to depict “sein gesamtes bis dahin gelebtes Leben als solches und unter seiner eigenen Person als Erzählprosa”, second, “Wirklichkeitstreue (zumindest – Nähe) und Personenidentität von Autor und 'Held'”, third, the differentiation from all works “die, des Kunstcharakters entbehrend, lediglich als Gebrauchsliteratur verfaßt wurden” and from those, like memoirs, which foreground the objective rather than the subjective elements of the narrative. These works have to be regarded as historiography rather than as literature. Fourth, the formal coherence derived from the focus on the exclusively personal perspective of the narrator in contrast to the depiction of the “Allgemein-Menschliche” in the *bildungsroman* is an important characteristic of the autobiographical genre. (33-35)

To avoid the difficulties of dealing with different sub-genres of autobiographical accounts, I have selected for an in-depth analyses exclusively book-length published autobiographical narratives. Oral history collections, letters, diaries and journals as well as unpublished materials are thus excluded from my study and serve only as foils. Oral histories are defined through the “collision between autobiography and biography, representing at least two perspectives of history, and yielding many more.” (Clark 677) They belong to the realm of history rather than of literature and aim at “collecting, preserving, and interpreting information about the past through the study of both individual and social experiences in story form.” (Clark 677) Diaries and journals are also “characterized by [their] hybridity and diversity [...]” The

²⁰ Robert Southey used the term in the first edition of the influential journal *The Quarterly Review* in 1809. For the definition and history of autobiographical literature see “Autobiographie.” *Metzlers Literaturlexikon*, “autobiography.” *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theories*, “autobiography.” *Life Writing: A Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography and Related Forms*, “Autobiography.” *Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*.

diary“lies on the border between life and its representation, supplementing both. It may be classified as art, or document. [...] It is an artless presentation of the self, a text that can be looked through, to catch a glimpse of undistorted life.” (Cottam 268)²¹ Autobiographies thus are distinguished from fictional texts because they are rooted in empirically verifiable facts. They are distinguished from other forms of life-writings by their artful presentation of a life story.²²

Philip Lejeune argues that autobiographies are not self-contained worlds; rather, the reader presupposes the identity of real author, narrator, and protagonist. Lejeune calls this willing suspension of disbelief the “autobiographical pact” between author and reader.²³ Paul John Eakin also argues that

the principal reference, of course, being the identity explicitly posited between the central character and the narrator in the text on the one hand and the author of the text on the other hand. It is precisely such a narrative’s claim to be a version of the author’s own life, anchored in verifiable biographical fact, that distinguishes an autobiography for the reader from other kinds of texts which it may closely resemble in other respects. (*Fictions* 184-185)

The subject of autobiographical writing is the reconstruction of the self, not the mimetic textual reproduction of a real life.²⁴ Eakin argues that “the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of the present consciousness,” and further, “that autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and [therefore] that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure.” (Eakin, *Fictions* 3-5) The self presented in the narrative and the narrating self are two manifestations of the author’s self-perception which are able to interact in the text. Thus, it is possible to employ the distinction between experiencing I and narrating I²⁵ for the analysis of autobiographical texts which has been developed for the analysis of the first-person narrative situation in fictional autodiegetic narratives, also for the analysis of autobiographical texts.²⁶ Stanzel explains:

²¹ For a short overview of “War Diaries and Journals” see Peterson.

²² The use of autobiographies as historical source material is discussed by Günther who warns against the naive use of autobiographies as objective description of experiences and events.

²³ For an extensive criticism of Lejeune’s concept see Kley 54-61.

²⁴ See Kley 20-25.

²⁵ Stanzel calls them the “experiencing self” and the “narrating self” (212). Throughout this study I will use both “experiencing I” and “experiencing self” as well as “narrating I” and “narrating self” synonymously.

²⁶ Autodiegetic narratives are defined as “first-person narrative[s] the narrator of which is also the protagonist. (Prince, Dictionary 9) Stanzel defines the first-person narrative situation: “It is characteristic for the first-person narrative situation that the mediacy of narration belongs totally to the

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The narrative distance separating the two phases of the narratorial 'I' temporally, spatially, and psychologically, is generally a measure of the intensity of the process of experience and education to which the narrating self was subjected to before it began the narration of its story. [...]. The variety of its forms extends from identification to complete estrangement between the narrating and the experiencing self. [...] [The narrator] remains bound to his earlier self by numerous existential threads despite his manifold transformations. If he or she looks back at the mistakes and confusion of his or her former life from the distance of mellow age [...], the narrator usually can recognize some kind of pattern; if, on the other hand, he or she has not yet attained this distance from the experiencing self of the surveyed life or has attained it only partially [...] then confusion and the lack of orientation of experience will also become part of the narrative process. The shorter the narrative distance, the closer the narrating self stands to the experiencing self. The horizon of knowledge and perception of the experiencing self becomes narrower and the effect of memory as a catalyst capable of clarifying the substance of experience is correspondingly limited. (212-214)

The relation of both selves, the narrating and the experiencing self, play a crucial role in the process of the formation and presentation of the autobiographical self. In contrast to oral histories, letters and diaries, autobiographies can make use of literary modes of presentations which are usually employed in fictional texts. The understanding of the self as "fictive structure" constructed in hindsight as well as the use of literary modes of presentation render the categorization of autobiographies as non-fiction questionable. Rather, autobiographies are wanderers between the worlds of fiction and fact. In the analyses of the selected texts, I will discuss the presentation of the self and the degree of fictionalization.

Identity

Odo Marquard states: "Das Thema Identität hat Identitätsschwierigkeiten: die gegenwärtige inflationäre Entwicklung seiner Diskussion bringt nicht nur Ergebnisse, sondern auch Verwirrungen. In wachsendem Maße gilt gerade bei der Identität: alles fließt." (347) Indeed, although the term 'identity' is very much en vogue today, it is often only vaguely defined. For the present study it is necessary to discuss the concept

fictional world of the characters of the novel the mediator, that is the first-person narrator, is a character of the world just as the other characters are. The world of characters is completely identical of the world of the narrator." (3)

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of 'identity' in the context of autobiographical writings. Also, it is necessary to define words that are associated to the semantic field "identity",

especially 'self,' 'personality,' and 'character.' Since one of the main areas of my study is concerned with the comparison of male and female identity formation in their respective autobiographies, I will also discuss the theories of identity formation of women through writing and on the concept of *écriture féminine*.

The post-classical latin word *identitas* was first used by the Roman writer Martianus Capella about 425 AD in his work *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*. The formation of the word *identitas* is unclear. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that "[n]eed was evidently felt of a noun of condition or quality from idem to express the notion of 'sameness', side by side with those of 'likeness' and 'oneness' expressed by similitas and unitas [...]." The word appeared for the first time in the English language in the form of 'idemptitie': In 1570, Sir Henry Billingsley used it in his translation of the Greek mathematician Euclid to denote the identity of proportions of bodies. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "identity" basically as the "quality of condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness." "Oneness" means especially the "sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing" (*Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* 574.)

In regard to persons, 'identity' is defined as the "sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality; personality." Personal identity thus means the "condition or fact of remaining the same person throughout the various phases of existence." (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Individuality denotes "the distinguishing character of personality of an individual" (*Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* 574) And "personality", mainly synonymous with "character," has to be understood as "the complex of characteristics that distinguishes an individual or a nation or group;", further, "personality" also means "[...] the totality of an individual's behavioral and emotional characteristics." (*Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* 191, 865)

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While “identity” is understood as “that part (or ensemble of characteristics, beliefs, stories) of ourselves that remains unchanged and which represents continuity” (Brockmeier 455) the self is a temporary and changing structure. It is defined as follows:

The “self” is best described as a kind of subjective structure – that is, one belonging entirely to the subject, to the individual who experiences, who is conscious, who has an ‘inner life’ and a point of view. The self may be said to maintain the subject’s conscious and perhaps unconscious psychological and somatic sense of his or her own identity, the sense of unique, more or less persistent, more or less cohesive, being. It seems to be a kind of ‘structure’ because self-experience (self-consciousness) seems characteristically to assume or to be described as a kind of ‘organization’ specific to the individual. It can be thought of as “a map of the interior” that each person carries inside his or her body [...] (Olsen 799)

This map of the interior is subject to change whenever new parts of the inner world are discovered or other parts which have already been mapped have to be surveyed anew. Consequently, Paul John Eakin understands the self as “not given, monolithic, and invariant, but dynamic, changing, and plural.” (*Lives*, xi)

The present concept of identity is derived from psychological as well as philosophical sources.²⁷ The concept of identity as a psychological category can already be found in the works of William James. In *Principles of Psychology* (1890), he presented his concept of “personal identity” which he defined as follows: “The sense of personal identity [...] is the sense of a sameness perceived by thought and predicated of things thought-about. These things are a present self and a self of yesterday. The thought not only thinks them both, but thinks that they are identical.” (332)

27 For the present study, the philosophical concept is less important than the psychological and sociological concepts of identity. Therefore, I will only discuss the latter ones at length. The philosophical development of identity theory was mainly influenced by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and David Hume, among others. It may suffice to say that the philosophical theory sees identity as “ein Prädikat, das eine besondere Funktion hat; mittels seiner wird ein einzelnes Ding oder Objekt als solches von anderen gleicher Art unterschieden; umgekehrt erlaubt dieses Prädikat zu sagen, daß unter verschiedenen Bedingungen und in verschiedenen Zugangsweisen doch nur ein einziger Gegenstand thematisch sein kann. Solche Identität verlangt gerade nicht, daß die identischen Einzelnen durch besondere Qualitäten voneinander zu unterscheiden sind. Schon gar nicht verlangt er, daß sich in ihnen ein Grundmuster von Qualitäten aufweisen läßt, in Beziehung auf das sie ihr Verhalten orientieren oder durch das dies Verhalten in einheitlichem Zusammenhang zu erklären ist. Auch ein Ding, das sich ganz erratisch zeigt, oder eine Person, die Lebensstil und Überzeugung mit den Witterungen und zudem alljährlich auf neue Weise wechselt, ist in diesem formalen Sinn als ‘mit sich identisch’ zu charakterisieren. Ist etwas ein Einzelnes, so ist ihm Identität zuzusprechen. Es hat keinen Sinn zu sagen, daß es Identität erwirbt oder verliert.” (Henrich 135). For a thorough discussion of the philosophical theory of identity see Henrich, esp. 137-182.

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Erik H. Erikson emphasized the relational character of identity. According to Erikson personal identity is the result of social process in which the individual constantly redefines itself in answer to the influences of other individuals and societal groups. Although he never precisely defined the term, it is possible to gather from his writings the following definition of “identity” as presented by Straub:

[Eriksons] formaltheoretischen Bestimmungen laufen darauf hinaus, (personale) “Identität” als jene Einheit und Nämlichkeit einer Person aufzufassen, welche auf aktive, psychische Synthetisierungs- oder Integrationsleistungen zurückzuführen ist, durch die sich die betreffende Person der Kontinuität und Kohärenz ihrer Lebenspraxis zu vergewissern sucht. Dabei wird angenommen, daß Kontinuität und Kohärenz angesichts diachroner und synchroner Differenzerfahrungen gebildet oder konstruiert werden [...] (75).²⁸

Following Erikson, Jürgen Straub states: “Identität setzt die Differenzierung und Bewahrung von Differenzen ebenso voraus wie die Synthetisierung oder Integration des Unterschiedenen.” (94) Consequently, identity has to be regarded as a construct:

Die Einsicht, daß kein Mensch Identität einfach hat, sondern daß Identität gebildet und im Lichte neuer Erfahrungen und Erwartungen durch Umstrukturierung bewahrt werden muß, besagt nicht zuletzt, daß die Identität einer Person ein Konstrukt ist. Auf der Suche nach Identität kann nichts gefunden werden, was bereits da ist, irgendwo im Verborgenen schlicht gegeben und auf seine Entdeckung wartend. Wer Erfolg hat bei der ‘Suche’ nach seiner Identität, hat in kreativen Akten geschaffen, wonach er suchte. Identität ist ein immer nur vorläufiges Resultat kreativer, konstruktiver Akte [...] (Straub 93).

Identity and Gender

Gender plays an important role in the discussion about identity. (Gymnich 16). In contrast to James and Erikson who did not distinguish between the development of men and women and saw the autonomous subject, male or female, as the goal of developmental processes, American psychologist Carol Gilligan states that the identity development progresses differently for both genders: while male identity development emphasizes the autonomy of the person, the development of female identity is rather constituted by situating the self in relationships to others. (27) The decisive difference between male and female self-conception, thus, is the meaning

²⁸ For a brief critical discussion of Erickson’s concept and further literature on the subject see Straub 76, FN 8.

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of relationships for the development of the personal identity. (Gymnich 45). As Chodorow argues, the differences in the identity formation of men and women derive from the different relationship to the mother. (93) Chodorow concludes:

[...] growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiations. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate. [...] Masculine personality, then, comes to be defined more in terms of denial of relation and connection (and denial of femininity), whereas feminine personality comes to include a fundamental definition of self in relationship. (169)

Autobiographical Genre and Identity Construction

Autobiographical literature especially serves as a place of identity construction. Paul John Eakin particularly emphasizes the close connection of identity construction and autobiographical narrative:

When it comes to autobiography, narrative and identity are so intimately linked that each constantly and properly gravitates into the conceptual field of the other. Thus, narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience, while self – the self of autobiographical discourse – does not necessarily precede its constitution in narrative. (Eakin, *Lives* 100).

The autobiography thus is not only the form in which identity is expressed but also the medium of self-experience. The generic marker “I” enables the autobiographer to construct a continuous identity that integrates different selves and to mask the gaps and disruptions in this construction that were “produced by passing time and memory’s limitations.” (Eakin, *Lives* 93) Memory itself has to be regarded as a construct and as changing due to the respective situation of the person who recalls an event. Eakin states that “past experience is necessarily – both psychologically and neurologically – constructed anew in each memory event or act of recall. Memories, and memory itself, moreover, is plural.” (*Lives* 106) Consequently, memory as well as the self at the center of autobiographical narrative

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are temporary constructs. Autobiography is not only the medium for the representations of the momentary perception of memory and self, but also the very place where self and memory can be constructed anew. The formal and generic conventions of autobiographical writings suggest the construction of identity as continuous and undisrupted. Thus, as Eakin concludes, “[a]s makers themselves, autobiographers are primed to recognize the constructed nature of the past, yet they need at the same time to believe that in writing about the past they are performing an act of recovery: narrative teleology models the trajectory of continuous identity, reporting the supreme fiction of memory as fact.” (*Lives* 98)

As my studies deals with autobiographies of male and female veterans, theories about alleged basic differences between male and female authors have to be taken into account. Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have proposed a theory of *écriture féminine*, of a distinct way of female writing. Following Lacan’s theory that women have no place in the dominant male “symbolic order”, female identity, Cixous argues, has to be based on “her capacity to deproprieate herself without self-interest: endless body, without ‘end,’ without principal ‘parts’; if she is whole, it is a whole made up of parts what are wholes, not simple, partial objects but varied entirety, moving and boundless change.” (88) This perception of the female self as without boundaries, ‘endless’ can best be represented by a special way of writing, the *écriture féminine*:

“Als Merkmale eines weiblichen Schreibens lassen sich in erste Linie Verstöße gegen sprachliche und literarische Normen ausmachen, mittels derer die symbolische Ordnung unterminiert werden soll. Weibliches Schreiben ist folglich gekennzeichnet durch ‘die Auflösung von Gattungsgrenzen, die Unabgeschlossenheit des Textes, ein nichtlineares Erzählen, Dialogizität, syntagmatische und grammatikalische Brüche sowie die Betonung der Materializität der Sprache über Rhythmus und Homophonie’.” (Gymnich 54)

Further, *écriture féminine* “soll mehrdeutig und widersprüchlich, fragmentarisch mit offenen Strukturen, voller Leerstellen und nicht-realistisch sein, um der Frau einen Ort eigenere Subjektwerdung zu schaffen und die symbolische Ordnung zu reformieren.” (Würzbach 146).

Structure of the Present Study

My study is structured in accordance with the three main areas of inquiry. The present chapter explains the theoretical background, the main questions, and the selection of

primary literature. It is followed by a discussion of the secondary literature which has proven to be most valuable for this study. The second chapter, "Vietnam, We've All Been There," offers the a brief overview of the history of the Vietnam war and includes background information about the general conditions of service for male and for female personnel. In line with the selections of autobiographical accounts by infantry soldiers and nurses, I have especially focused on their situation. A ensuing survey of the changing public discourse about the Vietnam conflict in American society provides the social and cultural background for the autobiographies. The last part of this chapter finally narrows the focus on the literary and filmic representations of the war and presents the autobiographies in their literary context.

Chapters three and four contain the in-depth analyses of the selected two pairs of male and female autobiographies. For the analysis I have relied on a combination of narratological analysis²⁹ and content-oriented close reading. In her recent study on *Entwürfe weiblicher Identität im englischen Frauenroman des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Marion Gymnich concludes that

inhaltliche Aspekte [untrennbar] mit darstellungstechnischen Aspekten verknüpft sind. Es hat sich gezeigt, wie gewinnbringend es ist, bei einer Beschäftigung mit einer zunächst scheinbar primär inhaltsorientierten Fragestellung wie dem Thema weiblicher Identität stets auch die literarische Umsetzung zu berücksichtigen, denn erst wenn inhaltliche und formale Aspekte in ihrer wechselseitigen Abhängigkeit erkannt werden, erschließt sich eine dem Medium angemessene Lesart, in welcher die spezifischen Darstellungsverfahren des literarischen Textes als polyfunktionale Bedeutungsträger gelesen werden. (330)

The questions of what is narrated and how it is narrated have to be discussed in relation to each other. On the contentual level, identity can be established through the self-portrayal of the narrator, through the integration in certain groups and the rejection of others, the adaptation or distancing from ideas, thoughts, and values. In line with my understanding of identity as a relational construct I have structured the analyses of the texts according to the different relationships of the protagonist and the decisive influences on his or her development. I have not tried to force a pre-

²⁹ Narratology is defined as "the theory of narratives" (Bal 3); to be more precise, "[n]arratology studies the nature, form and functioning of narrative (regardless of medium of representation) [...]." (Prince, *Dictionary* 65) A narrative consists of the "recounting (as product and process, object and act, structure and structuration) of one or more real or fictitious events communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two, or several (more or less overt) narratees." (Prince, *Dictionary* 58)

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conceived system of categories on all four narratives; rather, I have tried to do justice to the differences of the texts and the personal identity constructions by developing the categories according to the individual narrative. Nevertheless, the narratives, different as they are, have some categories in common: the cultural background of the author, the relationship to the military as an institution, the relationship to the fellow soldiers, the relation to the respective opposite sex, the decisive influence of the special war experience in Vietnam, the change of values and convictions, and the changing view of the politicians and war managers. Further, the function of literature and of writing is, although different for all four autobiographers, important for their self-perception. Since both female authors also tell about the time after their return from overseas, the relation to veterans' groups, to American society, to family and friends as well as the professional environment is important.

These analyses provide the basis for the discussions of the following chapters. In the chapter "Gender Matters?" I will compare the autobiographical accounts of the male authors with those of the female authors. Thus, I will be able to not only show more clearly the unique features of identity constructions in the selected texts but also to focus on the features common to all of them. The comparative approach does not aim at constructing generalizations or systems, proposing hypotheses, or distilling a kind of Weberian ideal type of Vietnam veterans' autobiographies from the results.³⁰ Rather, it is used to describe the specific conditions that lead to the respective constructions of identity. The comparison creates a 'dialogue' between the autobiographies. It also aims at the integration of the results of the individual analyses in the context of the other autobiographies discussed. Thus, it will show more clearly not only the unique features of identity constructions of the men and women. It will also reveal the elements common to both genders. The comparative approach does not predetermine its own results. I take into account that combat soldiers and nurses obviously served under different conditions in Vietnam. This obvious difference does not render the comparison meaningless. On the contrary: it can be used to identify important specifics in the

³⁰ See Weber 190-213.

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respective identity constructions of men and women respectively and help to discover potential similarities that might have existed in spite of the differences between the individual military careers. Further, I will discuss the question whether women veterans employ a specific kind of female writing, an *écriture féminine* for their narratives.

In the sixth chapter, I will proceed beyond the literary analysis to integrate a more historical perspective into my study. As Milton Bates argues following military historian John Keegan, war “is a human construction, a cultural artifact.” War is a product of human culture that varies according to the conditions of the respective culture. “If war is a culturally specific invention, then the rumor of war, as a narrative reconstruction of constructed events, is doubly imbued with the assumptions, values, and purposes of human culture.” (*Wars* 1-2) Starting from the assumption that autobiographical Vietnam war narratives participate in the public discourse about the war, the chapter aims at pointing out parallels, similarities, and differences between the identity constructions in the narratives and the changing public perception of the war and the veterans. Reviews of the respective autobiographies serve as interface between cultural discourse and personal depiction of war and of personal identity in the narrative. Thus, I will be able to locate the autobiographies in their specific cultural and historical contexts. The final chapter gives a conclusive résumé of my study.

I.2. VETERAN SCHOLARS – Critical Literature: An Overview

Autobiographical Writing and the Construction of Identity

Identity has become a thriving topic in scholarly literature. For the present study, Aleida Assmann and Heidrun Freese's multidisciplinary essay collection *Identitäten* (1999) provides the theoretical basis for my understanding of identity. The articles assembled in this volume cover a wide range of topics: they deal with the formation of personal identity as well as different areas of collective identity, be it gender identity, ethnic or national identity. Jürgen Straub's essay from this collection, "Personale und kollektive Identität," serves as the essential starting point concerning the constructedness of personal identity. Straub deals critically with Erikson's theory of identity formation. He argues that identity is no unchangeable, given entity, but temporary and subject to change in the light of the individual's changing experiences and expectations. Thus, the individual has to constantly re-create his or her identity and to actively preserve it through restructuring and adjustment to changing circumstances and conditions. Straub's essay emphasizes the procedural quality of identity and its preservation as an ongoing process of reconstruction.

For this study, the intricate relation of personal identity formation and autobiographical writing is central. John Paul Eakin's three studies, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985), *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (1992), and *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), provide the theoretical framework for this discussion. Especially in his most recent book *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Eakin combines Erikson's theories with new insights from brain research and psychology to propose a framework for the analysis of autobiographies. He argues that autobiographical narratives are the result of both the memory and the imagination of the author; consequently, the autobiography contains only one version of the multi-faceted life-story, namely that which fits the needs of the author at the time of writing. Thus, the self that is at the core of the narrative is subject to change too. Memory, too, is regarded as changing and created anew in every act of remembering. Eakin understands autobiographical writing as a means of identity formation and regards narration as a process of self-experience. The self presented in the text is not necessarily preceded by a self existing outside or before the text. Thus, Eakin

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argues for an understanding of autobiographical writing as an integral part of a life-long process of identity construction.

The construction of identity, however, is related to decisive factors such as race and class, gender, educational background, or social environment. In this wide range of influences, gender plays an important role in the scholarly discussions about identity. Marion Gymnich's recent study *Entwürfe weiblicher Identität im englischen Frauenroman des 20. Jahrhunderts* (2000) provides a comprehensive overview of the theoretical approaches to female identity formation as well as extensive case studies. She discusses psychoanalytical identity theories by Erikson and Nancy Chodorow as well as the theories of *écriture féminine* as developed by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. These theories serve as the background for the analyses of her case studies. Gymnich asks if and how a specific female identity is affirmed or rejected in the respective text. She focuses on the analysis of literary modes of presentation which are used to depict female identity. Gymnich argues for a combination of content-oriented and formal analyses to do justice to the complexity of female identity constructions in literary texts.

The Vietnam War in American Culture

The Vietnam War has become the subject of numerous scholarly works from a wide range of disciplines. My study is especially indebted to scholarly literature from the fields of literary studies, gender studies, cultural studies, and history. Especially since the beginning of the Eighties – in conjunction with the renewed public interest in the war – American academia began to explore the war from various perspectives.

Robert Buzzanco's study, *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life* (1999) deals with the impact of the Vietnam war on American society, especially on the protest movements of the Sixties. He understands both the war abroad and the domestic crises as resulting of the same economic and cultural consequences following the Second World War. Vietnam and th opposition to the war, culture, politics as well as the different civil rights movements were interrelated forces that influenced each other. The American government pursued a strategy of containment to deal with the war in vietnam as well as with the civil rights and protest

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Movements at home. Buzzanco states that Vietnam exposed the impossibility to enlarge democratic rights at home and to extend the American sphere of influence abroad at the same time. He argues that Vietnam was an event which transformed American society: it generated the largest mass protests in American history; it showed the limits of liberal reforms; it inhibited the progress of anti-poverty and civil rights movements while radical movements joined forces with them; it also helped to shape and promote other movements such as the women's movement; and it provoked a conservative backlash which is still influential in American politics and society. Thus, Buzzanco's study is especially valuable for understanding the cultural sources of the Vietnam debate and the societal changes in America from the 60s until the end of the 90s.

Keith Beattie's account *The Scar That Binds* argues that the Vietnam War, once a source of social division, has been reinterpreted as a force which unites the nation again. In the process of this reinterpretation, the Vietnam War was defined as a unique historical event. The personal experience of the veterans was regarded as the only authentic source for the 'truth' of this unique war, and the veteran was cast in the role of the authoritative spokesperson for this 'truth'. The crucial indicator became the fact of 'having been there,' histories and books by non-participants of the Vietnam War seemed insufficient to convey the unique truth of the war. Beattie argues that since the Eighties representations of the war underline the end of the Vietnam war as a dividing force and propagate the conclusion of the healing process of American society. Buzzanco's and Beattie's studies provide a detailed picture of the reinterpretation of the veterans' role and the underlying cultural, historical and political developments in American society which made this reinterpretation possible.

The Soldiers' Experiences

Male Soldiers

Apart from the autobiographical literature itself, I have strongly relied on Christian Appy's extensive study *Working-Class War* for the depiction of the American fighting men's war experiences. Appy combines a sociological with a historical approach. The study is based on approximately one hundred interviews with veterans as well as on discussions with participants of a veterans' therapy group.

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Appy not only presents convincing data concerning the social and educational background of the soldiers. He also discusses and analyzes the Vietnam experiences of the soldiers extensively and documents with their problems after their return to the States. Appy's study surpasses all other portrayals of soldiers' experiences concerning the scope of material and experiences represented in the book. He explicitly privileges the "subjugated knowledge" of the soldiers over that of the war managers. His aim is to "recover and interpret" the veteran's knowledge as a "fundamental part" of American history. (10) Appy's study gains its value through the detailed description and analysis of the combat soldiers' social background, their experiences in Vietnam, and their problems on their return to the U.S. and civilian life.

Appy's study provides extensive information on soldiers' war experiences as well as on the development of the public discourse about the Vietnam War and the veterans in the United States. A few other studies also contributed decisively to my understanding of the fundamental changes in the public image of the war and the veterans: Nicosia's detailed account *Home to War* (2001) provides not only a meticulous history of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement but also an excellent starting point to understand the development of the public discourse on Vietnam. The book covers the time from the founding of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War in 1967 until the end of the twentieth century. It combines extensive research and interviews with veterans of the Movement with a learned analysis of the cultural and political background of the veterans' image.

Female Soldiers

A comprehensive study concerning women's war experiences and their representation is still to be desired. For this study, I have relied on the introductory sections provided in the oral history collections of Walker, *A Piece of My Heart* (1985), Marshall, *In the Combat Zone* (1987), and Steinman, *Women in Vietnam* (2000). They provide historical and sociological data on women in Vietnam as well as brief synopsis of their war experiences. All studies deal primarily with the accounts of military nurses, although they also briefly mention civilian women and women who served in other than medical capacities. The women's story themselves offer valuable insights into the diversity of women's war experiences. They are not

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restricted to nurses' stories, but include other branches of the armed services and the experiences of civilian women.

A few books offer historical introductions to the situation and experiences of female soldiers: Saywell's *Women in War* (1985), Friedman/Rhoads's *Nurses in Vietnam* (1987), and Deardorf's *Another Kind of War Story* (1993) include the depiction of the tour of duty of military women in Vietnam. Myra MacPherson's book *Long Time Passing* from 1984 includes a chapter on the participation of both military and civilian women in Vietnam. The study focuses on the experiences of military nurses and describes briefly the controversial reception of Lynda Van Devanter's autobiography *Home Before Morning* in the context of the discussion about the public representation of female soldiers' experiences.

Margaret Perri's study, *Witnesses to War: The War Stories of Women Vietnam Veterans* (1998) has come out of the Women Veterans Oral History Project at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. This project collects the war stories of military and civilian women who had served in the Second World War, in Korea, Vietnam, and in Panama. Perri also includes stories of Vietnamese women veterans and Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. in her book. Perri is a Vietnam veteran herself; her own and four other Vietnam veterans' stories provide the basis for her psychologically oriented study which deals with war trauma and the "healing power of storytelling." (31)

Military women are discussed in the special edition of the journal *Vietnam Generation*, edited by Jaqueline Lawson, which is titled *Gender and the War: Men, Women and Vietnam* (1989). The twenty essays collected in this edition deal with widely different subjects from the popularity of paramilitarism to theoretical issues of feminist studies. Renny Christopher's article, titled "'I Never Really Became a Women Veteran Until ... I Saw the Wall'", provides a feminist interpretation of different oral history collections of women's war stories. The essay also briefly mentions Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* and interprets her narrative in relation to her role as caretaker. She analyzes the situation of military nurses who were expected to foreground the needs of the male soldiers and to repress their own. Christopher also

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emphasizes that military women found society in general and the women's movement in particular unresponsive to their problems and needs after their return from overseas.

Milton Bates essay "Men, Women and Vietnam" (1990) begins with a description of the history of the women's movement in the Sixties and the role of women in the anti-war movement. Using movies and literature as his case studies, among them O'Brien's *If I Die* and Caputo's *Rumor of War*, Bates proceeds to analyze the soldier's view of women and the misogyny inherent in military training in the Sixties. He argues that there is a category of works in response to the Vietnam war, for example Lynda Van Devanter's autobiography, which deal with those areas of the human psyche where social constructions of gender fail to provide sufficient explanations for emotions and behavior. Thus, he concludes war may not only be divisive but also be able to "bring them together in a recognition of their shared, intricate humanity." (56)

Carol Mithers' article "Missing in Action: Women Warriors in Vietnam" (1991) analyzes women's experiences in the wider context of gender roles and war. She argues that as a result of stereotyped social roles and a perception of war as exclusively male women are only perceived as helpmates for men and bystanders in war while men participate in what is regarded as the 'real war', i.e. in combat. Consequently, women's war experiences are marginalized. Despite the fact that women have always participated in wars in various ways, even in combat situations, their contribution is not part of the public perception of war. Mithers argues for a reevaluation of women's war stories. She emphasizes that women's stories need to be part of the war's legacy and have to be regarded as equally valid as those of the male soldiers.

To date, no scholarly work analyzes the writings of female veterans as artistic expressions of war experiences. Rather, women's accounts are primarily used as sociological and historical source material. But even in this respect analyses of autobiographical accounts of women veterans are scarce: Lynda Van Devanter's autobiography is at least mentioned in some of the studies mentioned above. But with the exception of four brief references in Bates' *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*,

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there are no critical discussions of Winnie Smith's *American Daughter Gone to War* or of the other three autobiographies by women.

War Literature

There are few comprehensive accounts of American war literature to date. The most extensive discussion of twentieth-century war literature is provided by Walsh's monograph *American War Literature*. Since it appeared in 1982, it could not discuss Vietnam War literature comprehensively. Walsh's aim is to provide an overview over almost a century of war writings; consequently, the literature of the Vietnam War plays only a minor role. Walsh argues that a great amount of Vietnam war literature displays formal innovations – for example plays use happenings and direct audience participation - and a plurality of literary conventions. Further, experimental fiction in the grain of Heller's *Catch-22* and Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* resulted from the Vietnam experience. These developments were supported by the changes in literary production in the era of mass paperback production which resulted in a faster distribution and greater availability of the literary works. Walsh discusses briefly Herr's *Dispatches* and Caputo's *Rumor of War*. He concludes that Vietnam has to be understood not only as a unique literary event, but especially as both “an aesthetic re-enactment and a radically new structuring of experience.” (x)

Paul Fussell's intriguing and highly readable study *The Great War and Modern Memory* provides the basis for my understanding of the soldiers' experiences in the 20th century wars. In contrast to prior wars, the First World War was the first modern war concerning technology, tactics, and the experience of a war of attrition. Images of trench warfare on the Western front have become paradigmatic for the perception of the First World War. Fussell's book explores the horrors of trench warfare on the Western Front in France and Belgium and discusses the literary means by which this experience has been “remembered, conventionalized, and mythologized.” (ix) He names irony as the basic situation of war which influences decisively the perception as well as the remembrance of the war: “Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends.” (7) Although he deals exclusively with the

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British soldier-poets of the Great War – Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, and David Jones are the most prominent – he regards the British experience of the First World War as the foil for the perception of the wars of the twentieth century. Fussell's seminal study serves as a starting point for the interpretation of modern war experience.

Studies of Vietnam War Literature

Philip Beidler's pioneering study *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam* (1982) was the first to introduced the Vietnam War as a topic of literary criticism in America.³¹ Beidler discusses Vietnam literature from 1958 to the 1980s in relation to the "larger process of cultural myth-making." (xi) He deals with fictional and non-fictional prose literature, with poetry, and briefly also with drama in the context of literary and cultural contexts and traditional American myths such as the frontier myth. His analysis includes extensive discussions of both O'Brien's *If I Die* and Caputo's *Rumor of War*. Beidler on the one hand emphasizes that Vietnam was a "self-contained world" (xiv). Consequently, veterans' writings can only acquire meaning in a personal way; their public effect is limited. On the other hand, the texts are embedded in the wider "symbolic prefigurations" (xiv) of American cultural memory. Beidler, a veteran himself, emphasizes that the war will only be over when American society will "have made it so through a common effort of signification, when we have learned at what costs it was waged for everyone it touched then and now and beyond." (202)

John Hellman's book *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1986) discusses a similar question as Beidler's. Using an interdisciplinary approach, he analyses the specific American cultural myths, especially the myth of the frontier that are reflected, assimilated or rejected in Vietnam literature and films. He traces the American frontier myth from Leatherstocking and Daniel Boone to the Green Berets. Hellman concludes that the encounter with Vietnam resulted in a reevaluation of the value of that and other American myths for the present.

³¹ There is one German study from 1972 preceding Beidler's book: the essay collection *Vietnamkrieg und Literatur*, edited by Gert Raeithel, deals with the subject of Vietnam in youth literature, autobiographies, novels, and poetry.

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In the Eighties and the first half of the Nineties, several often very detailed studies of Vietnam literature appeared. Thomas Myers' persuasive study *Walking Point* from 1988 understands the Vietnam War as a "network of sometimes complementary, often competing narratives." (x) Myers deals with fictional and non-fictional prose narratives. He is primarily concerned with the aesthetic representation of the war, discovering five major categories of Vietnam literature: the "camera-eye" presentation (34-69), the "memoir as wise endurance" (70-104), the Vietnam experience as journey into the "hearts of darkness" (105-139), the "writer as alchemist" who reflects on the use of language and integrates the different "languages" of official propaganda and grunts' jargon into his works" (140-185), and finally the "shades of retrieval" (186-221) in works which try to construct a satisfactory and acceptable ending for the war in hindsight. Myers includes O'Brien's and Caputo's autobiographical accounts into his analysis as examples for "memoirs of wise endurance." Similar to Beidler, he discusses the cultural myths that are put to the test in both narratives. Myers praises the autobiographies as "the offering of individual confession and historical lesson in terms of comparison of immediate history with classical models of heroism, ethics, and proper action." Further, he understands them as depictions of a "necessary compensatory history." (76) He emphasizes especially the intertextual references as well as the aesthetic strategies used in the narratives. Myers offers highly valuable literary analyses and interpretations of both autobiographies but neglects the specific generic conditions of autobiographical writings.

Beidler's second book on Vietnam War literature, *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation*, appeared in 1991. Again, Beidler discusses a broad range of literature: fiction, non-fiction, drama, and poetry. He is concerned with "the degree to which [Vietnam authors] have in an impressive number of instances made their going back to Vietnam in various forms of literary expression a going ahead as well into a diverse and complex literary mythmaking that has become part and fabric of our national existence as a culture." (xii) Thus, he continues the analytical approach applied to the Vietnam narratives in his first book.

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Ringnalda's *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*, and Kinney's *Friendly Fire* (reissued 2000) provide excellent case studies of fictional and non-fictional narratives. Further important collections of essays concerning different aspects of the Vietnam war, the literature and the movies have appeared: William Searle's *Search and Clear* (1988), Jeffrey Walsh's and James Aulich's *Vietnam Images* (1989), Owen Gilman's and Lorrie Smith's *America Rediscovered* (1990), and Philip K. Jason's *Fourteen Landing Zones* (1991). These collections offer a wide range of interpretations of diverse topics connected with the Vietnam War.

The only study to date which deals with personal identity in Vietnam War autobiographies is Lloyd B. Lewis' monograph *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives*. Lewis focuses exclusively on male soldiers' narratives. He discusses nineteen selected fictional and non-fictional narratives. His study aims at reconstructing the "world view" of the soldiers "from their own accounts." (ix) He uses the narratives to deduct the real author's outlook from them. Lewis regards the narratives as historical and sociological source materials, which provide a mimetic reconstruction of the events in Vietnam and the author's "world view." Thus, he neglects the literacy of the texts, and by taking them at face-value, the underlying significance expressed by artistic means. Further, he freely mixes autobiographical accounts with fictional narratives like O'Brien's surrealistic novel *Going After Cacciato*. Worried about the "fashionable talk of pluralism," (174) Lewis demands a conservative consensus about the war and warns that "uncertainty has bred barbarism in the past and may prove to be our undoing in the future." (175) Lewis' study, thus, is methodologically questionable and ideologically biased.

The only study to discuss autobiographies by both male and female authors is Milton J. Bates' very instructive, highly readable book *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*. In five chapters the author analyzes "The Frontier War," (9-47) "The Race War," (48-85) "The Class War," (86-131) "The Sex War," (132-173) and "The Generation War." (174-213) in a sixth chapter, he advances "Toward a Politico-Poetics of the War Story." (214-270) War, Bates argues, is a product of human culture; consequently, the war narratives are imbued with the values and cultural assumptions of the respective culture. The study aims at a "general history of five of the wars we took to Vietnam and a general criticism of the stories we brought back." (5) In the final chapter

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Bates discusses the war story as a specific genre. He uses narratological analyses of selected case studies – film, fictional and non-fictional accounts as well as poetry - for a study of traditional American myths. In his monograph, Bates discusses all four autobiographies I have selected for my study. Therefore, his book has become the most valuable source of criticism for this study, providing not only convincing interpretations of special problems but also a general understanding of “[w]hat the stories mean and how they mean [...]” (6) Although Bates’ interpretations serve as a point of departure for my own analyses, in my own study I aim at a more in-depth analysis and focus on a comparison of autobiographies by male and female authors.

The critical literature concerned with the autobiographical statements of Vietnam veterans, be they oral histories, autobiographies, letters, or interviews, can be divided into two distinct groups: The first group - Appy, Lewis, Nicosia, and most of the works on women’s war experiences - uses the autobiographical statements as sociological and historical source materials. Although this group of works concentrates mainly on oral histories and interviews, it also includes autobiographies in its analysis. Consequently, these works foreground the experience of war rather than the literariness of the accounts.

The second group of works is concerned with the literary qualities of the autobiographical accounts rather than with the recording of the factual war experience. These studies mostly deal with published autobiographical literature. Following Beidler’s lead, they analyze the cultural myths and literary traditions which Vietnam literature uses, assimilates or rejects (Hellman). They include influence studies as well as analyses of the special literary modes of presenting the soldier’s experiences and the war (Myers, Bates).

Both scholarly approaches exist independently side by side but have only few points of contact. My own study integrates the two approaches. My focus on the construction of personal identity implies also the analysis of cultural myths, of literary traditions, of intertexts, or of modes of presentation which can be regarded as manifestations of the identity construction of the respective autobiography’s author. At the same time, identity construction must also be regarded in relation to

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the experiences of the author and the historical facts of his or her life. The combination of both approaches is indispensable to do justice to the complexity of the construction of personal identity in autobiographical texts.

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II. VIETNAM, WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE – The United States and The Vietnam War³²

II.1.ON THE TIGER'S BACK – A Brief History of the Vietnam War³³

When in 1960 John Fitzgerald Kennedy became president of the United States he was immediately involved in a growing crisis in Southeast Asia. The focus of American foreign policy at that time was not on Vietnam. As the retiring President Eisenhower advised his successor, Laos was considered the “key to the entire area of Southeast Asia.” (McNamara 35)³⁴ But, as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara recalls, “[w]ithin a few weeks it became evident that trouble was developing in South Vietnam in addition to Laos, and faster than we had anticipated.” (37) The United States had supported the South Vietnamese government since the division of the country at the Geneva Conference in 1954,³⁵ first with financial aid only, after 1955 additionally with military aid and more military advisors who were supposed to train the newly deployed South Vietnamese army.³⁶ Nevertheless, Kennedy was not prepared to “pay any price or bear any

³² “Vietnam, we’ve all been there” are the final words of Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (207).

³³ This chapter is based principally on two comprehensive histories of the Vietnam war, namely on Karnow’s classic account *Vietnam* from 1983, and Marc Frey’s *Geschichte des Vietnamkriegs* from 1998. The most important reference book with entries on nearly every conceivable aspect of the Vietnam war is the *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, edited by Spencer C. Tucker. For a comprehensive account see the respective chapters in Patterson. – “Once on the tiger’s back, we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount,” cautioned George Ball, a lawyer who served in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. He always argued against the American involvement in Vietnam. Karnow 395.

³⁴ For an account of the development of the American involvement in Indochina after the Second World War, the development in Vietnam, and the role of Laos in Southeast Asia see Gardner, or Kahin, or, more recently, O’Donnell.

³⁵ The Geneva Conference that took place from May 8 through July 21, 1954 ended French colonial rule over Vietnam. It also temporarily divided the country into a northern and a southern part, with the 17th parallel serving as demarcation line until elections scheduled for July 1956 would determine the future government of the reunited Vietnam. The United States promised to guarantee the security of South Vietnam and to back the Diem government in Saigon. See Karnow 198-205, and Frey 36-40.

³⁶ As early as 1950 President Truman had sent a group of military advisors to Vietnam. About 360 men formed this Military Assistance and Advisory Group. The MAAG oversaw the distribution of military aid and trained South Vietnamese forces. Frey 56-58.

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burden” (306)³⁷ to protect the South Vietnamese government – the deployment of combat troops was out of the question.³⁸

After the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963, Lyndon Baines Johnson succeeded him as thirty-sixth president of the United States. Convinced of the validity of the domino theory and under pressure to get elected in November 1964, Johnson presented himself as a bulwark against Communism. He continually increased military and economic aid for South Vietnam and at the same time had the Pentagon develop plans for bombing North Vietnam, although he appeared reluctant to actually go to war. The ongoing civil war in South Vietnam between followers and adversaries of president Ngo Dinh Diem as well as the overthrow of the Diem administration by General Nguyen Khan in January 1964 with at least the tacit agreement of the American government seriously destabilized South Vietnam. In this situation of unrest and the threat of war, Johnson realized that the South Vietnamese forces were neither willing nor able to stop the advance of Communism and decided that he “would have to Americanize the war: “Power. Power on the land, power in the air, power wherever it’s necessary. We’ve got to commit it...” (Karnow 386)

In July covert maritime operations began along the North Vietnamese coast. On August 2, the American destroyer *Maddox* reported an attack by North Vietnamese patrol boats in the Tonkin Gulf; two days later a similar incident supposedly occurred that involved both the *Maddox* and the US destroyer *Turner Joy*.³⁹ While

³⁷ John F. Kennedy: “Inaugural Address, 20th January, 1961,” quoted in Ford 306.

³⁸ For a detailed account of Kennedy’s dealings and decisions concerning South Vietnam see Karnow 247-311. Very critical of Kennedy’s involvement in Vietnam, of course, is Chomsky. – The question of whether Kennedy would have sent in combat troops or withdrawn completely from Vietnam if he had not been assassinated in November 1963 has been the object of vast speculations. The discussion of that question has filled books, see for example Newman or Paterson. McNamara, Kennedy’s Secretary of Defense, is quite convinced that “he would have pulled us out of Vietnam. He would have concluded that the South Vietnamese were incapable of defending themselves, and that Saigon’s grave political weakness made it unwise to try to offset the limitations of South Vietnamese forces by sending U.S. combat troops on a large scale. [...] Kennedy would have agreed that a withdrawal would cause a fall of the ‘dominoes’ but that staying in would ultimately lead to the same result, while exacting a terrible price in blood.” (96).

³⁹ The most comprehensive and thoroughly researched account of the incidents in the Tonkin Gulf to date is provided by Moise. He comes to the conclusion that the report of the second incident “was an error. The night was very dark, and the radar was playing tricks and showing ghost images that the men on the destroyers mistakenly interpreted as hostile vessels.” (XI). Nevertheless, Moise argues, “[t]he evidence that is available on the American side does not support the Vietnamese charge that the

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the United States did not retaliate for the first attack, after the second incident Johnson ordered heavy air strikes against North Vietnam. On August 7 Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. The crucial passages read:

Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression. [...] The United States is [...] prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.⁴⁰

Although the Johnson administration did everything to avoid the impression that the resolution gave Johnson *carte blanche* to escalate the involvement in Vietnam to a full-blown ground war, the resolution was in fact tantamount to a declaration of war.⁴¹ Nevertheless, it is important to note that legally it was not a declaration of war. This had several consequences, the most important being the impossibility of censoring the press or of limiting the freedom of movement of reporters.⁴²

Johnson administration knowingly faked the incident of August 4 in order to create an excuse to escalate the war.” (203). Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and President Johnson himself had doubts about the reality of the attack later on (210, and McNamara 132-143) but were convinced of the truth of the reports when the air strikes were ordered and Congress was asked to pass the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Additionally, Johnson was under considerable political pressure since he campaigned for the presidential elections in November against Barry Goldwater, a conservative hardliner against Communism. “If Johnson had refused to take action on the grounds that he was not sure the reports had been accurate, he could not reasonably have expected to keep the story from reaching the public [...] at least some voters would have been convinced that the attack had been genuine, that there had never been serious grounds for doubting its reality, and that Johnson had attempted to cover up a Communist attack on U.S. fighting men either out of cowardice or out of political expediency” (211), which would have cost him dearly in the elections. A Harris poll quoted by Moise shows that the public nearly unanimously supported the way Johnson dealt with the Tonkin Gulf crisis: “85 percent of the public approved while only 3 percent disapproved. This led to a major shift in the way the public perceived Johnson’s handling of the war in general: Shortly before Americans had disapproved of Johnson’s general handling of Vietnam by a margin of 58 percent to 42 percent. Following the incidents at sea and the U.S. air strikes, the Harris organization found the public approved of Johnson’s handling of Vietnam, 72 percent to 28 percent.” (225-226). - For a meticulous account of the alleged attack in the night of August 4, 1964 see 73-207. - For an in-depth analysis of the senatorial decision-making process see Siff.

⁴⁰ *Southeast Asia Resolution* quoted from Moise 226. - For the full text of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, (Resolution 189) see Siff 115-116.

⁴¹ The Johnson administration was quite successful in persuading Congress not to think of the resolution as a veiled declaration of war. See for example Moise 227, and McNamara 136-139.

⁴² Major studies on the role of the press in the Vietnam war are provided by Wyatt and by Hammond.

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The American goal was not to win a war against North Vietnam but to avert the collapse of South Vietnam. Bombing raids on North Vietnam were considered the most effective way to stop the advance of the Communist forces. (Frey 119) 'Operation Rolling Thunder,' the incessant bombing of North Vietnam began in February 1965, in retaliation of attacks of the Vietcong guerilla on the American military bases in Bien Hoa and in Pleiku.⁴³ On March 8, the first American combat ground troops, two marine battalions, landed to defend the Danang airfield. (Frey 120-121, McNamara 163-166) Studies indicated that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) would not be able to survive against the Communist forces without massive military support from the Americans. The American government ignored warnings of experts who had already predicted some of the major problems of the American troops in Vietnam: the difficulty of distinguishing between friend and foe, the American troops' inadequate knowledge of guerilla and jungle warfare, the aversion of the Vietnamese people to the foreign troops, and the attempt of the South Vietnamese government to transfer more and more difficult and dangerous tasks to the responsibility of the Americans. As early as December 1965, nearly 200,000 American troops were stationed in Vietnam. (Karnow 682) They had orders to protect the American bases and to carry out offensive operations in a limited radius around the bases.

Although most Americans supported President Johnson's decisions,⁴⁴ even in these early months of the conflict an anti-war movement began to form. On April 17, 1965, 25,000 Americans demonstrated in Washington, D.C. against the war. The influential *New York Times* questioned the necessity of risking American soldiers' lives in defense of a country that was neither democratic nor of strategic importance.⁴⁵ Hoping to pacify his American and foreign critics, Johnson offered

⁴³ For exact numbers of flights and bombs released over North Vietnamese territory as well as an analysis of the effectiveness of 'Rolling Thunder' see Frey 126-129. All in all, the United States Air Force dropped eight million tons of bombs on Indochina during the Vietnam war, twice as much as all the bombs dropped in the Second World War combined. – A critical analysis of the Air Force's mythologization of the Vietnam War is provided by Tilford's article "Setup."

⁴⁴ McNamara quotes a Gallup poll from August 1965 that showed 57 percent approval for "the way the Johnson Administration is handling the situation in Vietnam" in contrast to 25 percent disapproval. 208

⁴⁵ For a more detailed account of the anti-war activities in America and abroad see Frey 122-123. A selection of important articles on this subject provides Hixson, *The Vietnam Anti-War Movement*. The most meticulous and up-to-date monographic history of the Vietnam veterans' movement is provided by Nicosia.

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Ho Chi Minh participation in a Southeast Asian development plan, a kind of 'Great Society' in Vietnam, under the condition that South Vietnam remained a non-Communist and Western-oriented independent country. This was, as Marc Frey comments, nothing more than a polite invitation to name place and time of unconditional surrender. (123) Not surprisingly, Ho Chi Minh declined the invitation by responding with four articles that were directly opposed to the American demands.⁴⁶

Both sides hoped for a quick victory. General William Westmoreland,⁴⁷ head of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) developed a military strategy that was supposed to unfold in three phases and predicted the end of the war by 1967:

Phase 1 would be to halt the Communists' advances – 'to stop losing the war' – and would extend through December 31, 1965. Phase 2 would involve taking the offense against Communist forces and expanding the pacification program aimed at 'winning the hearts and minds' of South Vietnam's peasantry. It would run from January 1 through June 30, 1966. Unless the Communists gave up, Phase 3 would kick in 'to destroy or render militarily ineffective the remaining organized VC units and their base areas.' It would begin July 1, 1966, and run through December 31, 1967. (McNamara 209-210)

Westmoreland waged a war of attrition. The main goal was not to conquer territory, but to 'search and destroy' Vietcong as well as regular North Vietnamese forces.⁴⁸ The daily 'body count', the counting of dead enemies, became the sole indicator for success. The first major battle between American and North Vietnamese forces in the Ia Drang valley in October 1965 ended with the defeat of the North Vietnamese forces, but the Americans were forced to realize that they fought with skill,

⁴⁶ North Vietnam's 'Four Points' demanded the unconditional withdrawal of all American troops from South Vietnam, an end to the American aggression against North Vietnam, the establishment of a coalition of all 'peace-loving' factions, and the peaceful reunification of Vietnam. See Frey 123.

⁴⁷ William C. Westmoreland, called 'Westy' by his friends in Washington and 'Waste More Land' by his not-so-friendly troops in Vietnam, was commander of the U.S. combat forces in Vietnam from 1964 through 1968. In March 1968, he was appointed army chief of staff and returned to Washington. He was replaced by General Creighton Adams as head of MACV. For a full account of his views and experiences in Vietnam see his autobiography *A Soldier Reports*. For a short biography see John F. Votaw.

⁴⁸ For a brief description of the tactic of attrition and its pros and cons see Stone.

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determination, and zest.⁴⁹ Although Westmoreland was satisfied with the “kill ratio” – the Communist forces had lost nearly two thousand men compared to three hundred American dead - public opinion in the United States was not ready to accept large numbers of American casualties. Already, at this early stage of the war, two problems surfaced that became decisive for the Vietnam experience: opposition at home fuelled by rising casualty numbers and dissatisfaction of the soldiers with their military leaders who they deemed irresponsible. Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition thus proved unsuccessful from the start. (Karnow 480)

Johnson worried about the domestic dissent and about surveys showing that the majority of Americans wanted a renewed peace initiative. (Karnow 481) On December 23, 1965, Johnson therefore suspended the bombing of North Vietnamese targets to enable peace talks, but to no avail. The bombing was resumed on January 31, 1966.

Apart from the air war, Westmoreland relied nearly exclusively on superior firepower and technology. In order to deprive the enemy forces of cover and food, the U.S. used herbicides such as Agent Orange to defoliate the jungles.⁵⁰ The North Vietnamese forces mostly avoided direct confrontation with the American troops, and used various kinds of mines and traps to decimate their enemies. When engaging large units, they tried to get as close as possible to the American perimeters to render American firepower ineffective. The U.S. military was in no way prepared for the guerilla war it had to fight. Additionally, the U.S. had underestimated Hanoi’s ability to recruit new soldiers, and the aversion of the Vietnamese population against the foreign power.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Nicosia 56-57. For a short description of the battle see Bell. For an account of a participant see Lt. Gen. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway.

⁵⁰ The Americans sprayed over 3.6 million acres of Vietnamese soil, until the spraying was halted in 1971 due to warnings from the surgeon general that Agent Orange might cause serious illness in the people exposed to it. Nevertheless, affected veterans had to fight for years to get large chemical companies such as Dow Chemical indicted and to be compensated for medical treatment and illnesses related to Agent Orange. For a meticulous account of the veterans’ struggle see Nicosia 434-505.

⁵¹ A brief overview of the ground and air war is provided by Hall.

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The American military failed to develop an appropriate strategy. Nevertheless, the Americanization of the war progressed through 1966 and 1967. Although the Johnson administration was deeply divided on questions of strategy, Johnson in his 1967 'State of the Union' address to Congress again confirmed that he would "stand firm" on the subject of Vietnam. (Karnow 502) Westmoreland requested the deployment of more and more combat troops to Vietnam, and although the Johnson administration was worried about what looked like "an open-ended commitment [that was] slipping out of control," (McNamara 213) American troop strength amounted to about 500,000 men and women at the end of 1967. Nevertheless, a "half-hearted search for peace" (Frey 147) continued through these years. Public opinion still remained in favor of Johnson's Vietnam policy throughout most of 1966 and 1967, despite rising casualty numbers and increasingly critical media scrutiny. (McNamara 252ff, Frey 150-159) The relatively new medium of TV brought the war directly and daily into American living rooms. But in contrast to the very critical coverage of the later war years, TV and the print media initially supported the government's Vietnam policy. The media "tended to follow rather than lead the U.S. public, whose opinions were usually shaped more by such events as the tax surcharge [in August 1967, P.F.] or the death of a local boy than by television broadcasts and newspaper commentaries." (Karnow 488)⁵² But Johnson's 'limited war' lost public support in proportion to the deployment of more and more troops to Vietnam and to the growing realization that the war would not be over soon. By the beginning of 1967, about six thousand American soldiers had already been killed in Vietnam. (Karnow 502) In the second half of 1967 public opinion slowly changed and the media followed: in October only 39% of the American public still trusted Johnson's Vietnam policy. (Karnow 489, Frey 158) At about the same time, General Westmoreland ordered his aides to study the use of tactical nuclear weapons to stop the influx of North Vietnamese infantry divisions into the Khe Sanh area. The Johnson administration hastily called a halt to the research, fearing increasing protests if the press discovered the study.⁵³

⁵² It is important to remember the increasingly important role of the independent and underground media, such as GI newspapers, the Pacifica radio network broadcasting from Berkeley, and others, in shaping public opinion about the war. For a short account of the role of independent media see Franklin, *Vietnam* 89-110.

⁵³ China, too, contemplated the use of atomic weapons to aid North Vietnam in the case of an American invasion. Westmoreland later on argued that "the use of nuclear weapons could conceivably

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On October 21, 1967, the famous march on the Pentagon took place.⁵⁴ Vietnam veterans voiced their views and demanded an immediate end of the war. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War staged their own Veterans' Day celebrations, and one day later ran an advertisement in the *New York Times* signed by sixty-five veterans that demanded an immediate withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam. This advertisement attracted nationwide attention for the Vietnam Veterans' anti-war views, and was even read into the *Congressional Record*. (Nicosia 25-26) Important leaders of the civil rights movement like Martin Luther King also joined forces with the anti-war movement, thus lending their moral authority to the veterans' cause. (Frey 156)

1968 brought the turning point in American public opinion and politics concerning the involvement in Vietnam. On January 31, the beginning of the Vietnamese lunar year, more than 80,000 North Vietnamese guerilleros simultaneously attacked five of the six largest cities, most of the provincial capitals, and numerous villages throughout South Vietnam.⁵⁵ It was a clear violation of the truce they had pledged to observe during the Tet festivities. Due to a disastrous "intelligence failure ranking with Pearl Harbor," (Karnow 543) the attack took the Americans completely by surprise. The Communist forces were even able to seize the American embassy in Saigon and to hold it for six and a half hours until it was recaptured by marines. Over the next days and weeks, American forces were able to free all captured cities and villages. But despite the quick American response and the military victory of American and South Vietnamese forces, the Tet offensive as well as the widely televised battle for Khe Sanh, (Karnow 529-534) and the siege of Hué (Karnow 539-542) dealt devastating blows to public support for the war. In March, a Pentagon analyst summed up the situation: "The price for military victory had increased vastly, and there was no assurance that it would not grow again in the

have compelled the Communists to capitulate, in the same way that two atomic bombs 'had spoken convincingly' to the Japanese leaders during World War II [...]." Karnow 539-540. For the Chinese position see "McNamara: In Vietnam drohte Atomkrieg". *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 25.6.1997.

⁵⁴ Among the marchers was Norman Mailer, who in 1968 published *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*. His book combines – in keeping with its subtitle - fictional narration with documentary pieces and won both the Pulitzer Prize and the prestigious National Book Award. - For an account by an 'insider' of the Pentagon see McNamara 303-305

⁵⁵ For an account of the Tet offensive see Gilbert, Jason and Head. A short survey is provided by Zabecky 678-681, and 681-683.

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future. There were also strong indications that large and growing elements of the American public had begun to believe the cost had already reached unacceptable levels and would strongly protest a large increase in that cost.” (Sheehan et al. 611-612)

Indeed, when it became known⁵⁶ that Westmoreland wanted 200,000 additional troops deployed to Vietnam, both the public and politicians were shocked. On March 16, Robert Kennedy, who openly opposed the government’s Vietnam policy, announced his candidacy for the presidency, campaigning against Johnson. He advocated the complete withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam as soon as possible.⁵⁷ Johnson’s Secretary of Defense McNamara resigned at the end of February because he disagreed with Johnson’s conduct of the war. (McNamara 273-317) By the end of March, Johnson was aware of the fact that after Tet the voters had lost faith in his conduct of the war, that the opinion leaders in the media were turning against him, and that he faced a severe crisis in his deeply split administration. He publicly proposed a halt to the bombings of North Vietnam if Hanoi would respond favorably to his proposal to re-open negotiations after the U.S. had restricted their bombing runs to the area below the twentieth parallel, thus sparing about 90% of North Vietnamese territory.⁵⁸ At the end of his speech Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election in order to keep the presidency unscathed by the partisan divisions that had developed. (Karnow 523)

To the astonishment of the American government, Hanoi reacted favorably to Johnson’s proposal. Consequently, preliminary peace talks began in Paris two months later. At the beginning of November peace talks between North Vietnam, South Vietnam, the U.S., and the U.S.S.R. began in Paris but it took five more years until they produced results. In these years America would see the “worst internal upheavals in a century.” (Karnow 566) The Democratic convention in Chicago in

⁵⁶ Westmoreland’s request became publicly known through an article in *The New York Times*, Sunday, March 3, 1968, titled “Westmoreland Requests 206,000 More Men, Stirring Debate in Administration.”

⁵⁷ Robert Kennedy blamed the government for misjudging the “nature of the war” and for trying “to resolve by military might a conflict whose issue depends on the will and conviction of the South Vietnamese people.” Nicosia 29.

⁵⁸ For the development in the early months of 1968 see Karnow 523-566.

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late August had already brought a foreshadowing of these upheavals, when some ten thousand anti-war protesters – among them members of different Vietnam veterans' organizations - fought against police and guardsmen who tried to prevent them by force from marching to the convention hall. (Karnow 580)

In January 1969 Richard Milhous Nixon succeeded Johnson as president of the United States. He promised to end the war in Vietnam but also vowed: "I will not be the first president of the United States to lose a war." (Karnow 577) Therefore, he planned to employ what he aptly called the 'Madman Theory':

I want the North Vietnamese to believe that I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know that Nixon is obsessed about Communists. We can't restrain him when he's angry – and he has his hand on the nuclear button' – and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace. (Karnow 582)⁵⁹

Nixon tried the same strategy that Eisenhower had successfully used in the Korean conflict. He planned to bluff Hanoi into ending the Vietnam war, but without success. In February, he increased the military pressure on North Vietnam by ordering the secret bombardment of North Vietnamese strongholds in Cambodia⁶⁰ while at the same time opening clandestine diplomatic channels to China and the Soviet Union. In June the president began the 'Vietnamization' of the war, the slow withdrawal of American troops and the transfer of responsibility for the conduct of the war to the South Vietnamese, by calling back 25,000 soldiers from Vietnam, and a further 60,000 in September,⁶¹ thus pacifying the peace movement. Furthermore, Nixon ended the draft system and introduced a draft lottery that obliterated the student deferments.⁶² At the same time, public resistance against the war reached a new climax. In October four million Americans demonstrated for an end to the Vietnam war, in November even more protested against the war. But by appealing to patriotic feelings, Nixon was able to gain countrywide support from

⁵⁹ See also Tucker, "Madman Strategy."

⁶⁰ For a short account of this secret operation with the appetizing name 'Menu' with the phases 'Breakfast,' 'Lunch,' 'Snacks,' and 'Dinner,' see Frey, *Vietnamkrieg*, p. 190f, and Earl H. Tilford: "Menu, Operation", in Tucker, ed., *Encyclopedia*, vol. I, p. 431-432. - For a detailed description of Nixon's Cambodia policy see Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 589-592.

⁶¹ For an analysis of the Vietnamization see Gartner.

⁶² For a brief overview of the U.S. practice of selecting men for service in the military see Dunn.

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the 'silent majority' and contain the anti-war movement for the moment: "Let us be united for peace. Let us be united against defeat. North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that." (Karnow 600)⁶³

Nixon's gradual withdrawal of troops from Vietnam and the 'Vietnamization' of the war indicated the impossibility of winning the conflict militarily. In March 1970, another 150,000 soldiers were called back from Vietnam. At the same time Nixon decided, against the better judgement of his Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the State, to invade Cambodian territory to destroy Vietcong positions. Only a very small majority of Americans supported the invasion. When on May 4, 1970, members of the National Guard shot four students at Kent State University,⁶⁴ protests erupted all over the country. Many veterans joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and similar veterans' groups that lobbied for an end to the war.⁶⁵ More than four hundred universities and colleges were shut down, and a hundred thousand protestors demonstrated in Washington against Nixon's policy in Southeast Asia. In the late summer of 1970, the American invasion of Cambodia had come to an end. A report on the unrest in universities and colleges warned of more violence erupting on the campuses that could endanger "the very survival of the nation." The commission [...] called the divisions splitting American society 'as deep as any since the Civil War' and contended that 'nothing is more important than an end to the war' in Vietnam." Also, "[s]urveys showed that increasing numbers of

⁶³ Polls rose to nearly 70% approval for Nixon's Vietnam policy after this speech. See Frey 193.

⁶⁴ Karnow describes the events at Kent State: "There, as elsewhere, antiwar students had attacked the reserve officers training building. Echoing Nixon's inflammatory rhetoric, Governor James Rhodes assailed the rioters as 'worse than brownshirts' and vowed to 'eradicate' them. He ordered national guardsmen onto the campus to impose order. On May 4, 1970, nettled by the demonstrators, they shot a volley of rifle fire into the crowd, killing four youths. The administration initially reacted to this event with wanton insensitivity. Nixon's press secretary, Ron Ziegler, [...] referred to the deaths as a reminder that 'when dissent turns to violence, it invites tragedy.'" 611.

⁶⁵ For example, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War had about 600 members in April 1970. In September, the number had grown to over 2000. Nicosia 52-53. For the student anti-war movement see Gilbert. - The well-known writer W.D. Ehrhart describes his decision to 'do something' against the war after the shootings: "It isn't enough to send us halfway around the world to die, I thought. It isn't enough to turn us loose on Asians. Now you are turning the soldiers loose on our own children. Now you are killing your own children in the streets of America. [...] And then I knew. It was time – long past time – to put aside excuses and pride and vain illusions. Time to forget all that was irretrievably lost. Time to face up to the hard, cold, utterly bitter truth I'd tried to avoid for nearly three years. The war was a horrible mistake, and my beloved country was dying because of it. America was bleeding to death in the ricefields and jungles of Vietnam, and now the blood flowed in our own streets. I did not want my country to die. I had to do something. It was time to stop the war." *Marking Time* 93-94.

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Americans wanted a firm deadline for a U.S. troop withdrawal from Southeast Asia.” (Karnow 625-626) In addition to the Kent State shootings, the court martial of Lieutenant William Calley, who was held responsible for the My Lai massacre,⁶⁶ and the publication of the secret *Pentagon Papers* by *The New York Times* in 1971 fueled to the growing anti-war stance of large parts of the American public. (Frey 199)⁶⁷

In Washington, D.C., former Vietnam GIs under the leadership of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War staged a week-long series of protests against the war, named Operation Dewey Canyon III.⁶⁸ Perhaps the most impressive event of this April week was the ‘Return of the Medals’ on Friday 23, when about eight hundred veterans threw medals they had gained in Vietnam over the fence in front of the Capitol. They regarded the medals as “symbol[s] of dishonor, shame, and inhumanity,” and many understood the return as a symbolic gesture of apology to the Vietnamese people, an accusation of the American government, an honoring for their fallen comrades, and a personal act of catharsis. (Nicosia 133-144)

At the beginning of 1972, only 6000 American combat soldiers (and a total of 95,000 American troops) were left in South Vietnam. When in a surprise attack in March North Vietnamese forces invaded South Vietnam, took several northern provinces and even threatened Saigon, Nixon ordered massive bombings of Hanoi and other North Vietnamese cities and the mining of the North Vietnamese Haiphong harbor.⁶⁹ At the same time diplomatic efforts for a speedy cease-fire continued. Although North Vietnamese officials had protested against Nixon’s bombing of their country, their representative Le Duc Tho resumed talks with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The talks dragged on without concrete results.

⁶⁶ A comprehensive history with a good selection of source material is provided in Olson and Roberts. The classical account is Neil Sheehan’s Pulitzer Prize-winning history *A Bright Shining Lie*, esp. 689-690. Interviews with Vietnamese survivors of the massacre and members of the infamous Charlie Company are given in Bilton and Sim.

⁶⁷ Critical about the value of the *Papers* is Kahin: “The Pentagon Papers”.

⁶⁸ The name was borrowed from the two secret incursions by American soldiers into Laos. It was meant to be a parody on “the military’s euphemistic style of dealing with death and destruction “ – the operations in Laos were called ‘limited incursions into the country of Laos’ – “[and] the vets quipped that they would be making their own ‘limited incursion into the country of Congress’”. Nicosia p. 98-99. – For a detailed description of Dewey Canyon III see 98-157.

⁶⁹ For a detailed account of the North Vietnamese offensive see Karnow 640-647.

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Meanwhile Nixon was re-elected with 61% of the vote in November 1972. He then again intensified the bombing of North Vietnam. Beginning on December 18, American bombers flew about three thousand missions against targets in the heavily populated area between Hanoi and Haiphong. The bombing continued for the next eleven days, excluding Christmas Day. It was the most concentrated air offensive of the entire war. Although the American public reacted in a relatively restrained way, news commentators and foreign powers were outspoken against Nixon's "Stone Age barbarism." (Karnow 652-653) When the bombings were halted, Le Duc Tho and Kissinger resumed the negotiations, and on January 9, 1973, they reached a peace agreement that was formally signed in Paris on January 27, 1973. "We have finally reached peace with honor," concluded Nixon. (Karnow 654)⁷⁰ The articles pronounced the end of hostilities and obliged the Americans to withdraw all troops within sixty days. North Vietnamese forces were allowed to stay in South Vietnam in exchange for the return of American prisoners of war. Up to the time of the reunification of North and South Vietnam, the Saigon government would continue to govern the country. The demilitarized zone served as demarcation line between the two parts of Vietnam.⁷¹ On March 29 the last American troops left Vietnam, and on April 1 the last American prisoner of war was released in Hanoi.⁷² In June, Congress blocked funds for all American military activities in Indochina. (Karnow 656)

Soon it became obvious that neither North nor South Vietnam was willing to respect the truce. North Vietnamese forces infiltrated the South, and hostilities continued. Meanwhile, in a speech at Tulane University on April 23, 1975, President Ford rhetorically ended the war for America and pronounced a return to business as usual: "Today, Americans can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished. [...] These events, tragic as they are, portend neither the end of the world nor of

⁷⁰ For the role of the anti-war groups in ending the war see Jeffreys-Jones.

⁷¹ For the full text see Tucker, *Encyclopedia* 3: 1067-1069.

⁷² During "Operation Homecoming" 591 prisoners of war returned to the United States, where they received a warm and grateful welcome from the president and the press. To the present day, some Vietnam veterans groups remain convinced that American GIs are imprisoned in North Vietnam and lobby for their liberation. See Franklin, *Vietnam* 173-201, who concludes: "We know with as much certainty as could ever be possible that there are not now, and never have been, American prisoners held in Vietnam after the war." (201).

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America's leadership in the world." (Karnow 667) Only a few days later, on April 29, 1975, Communist forces advanced on Saigon. About one thousand Americans, among them the ambassador and his staff, as well as nearly six thousand South Vietnamese, were airlifted out of the besieged capital.⁷³ Now, indeed, the American engagement in Vietnam had ended.⁷⁴

⁷³ For a detailed account see Karnow 668-669. The picture of rescue helicopters departing from the roof of the Saigon embassy became one of the lasting images of the Vietnam war, for some signifying the shameful defeat of the superior American military forces, celebrated by others as a fitting end to a shameful and dishonorable chapter in American history.

⁷⁴ When William Jefferson Clinton became president in 1993, the U.S. began to re-establish relations with Vietnam. It took twenty-two years, until 1997, for both nations to re-open embassies in the former enemy countries. See Frey 229-230.

II.2. BEAR ANY BURDEN – The Soldiers' War⁷⁵

All in all, about 2.5 million American male and female soldiers served in Vietnam between the arrival of the first combat troops on March 8, 1965 and the withdrawal of the last unit on March 29, 1973. About 58,200 American soldiers died there⁷⁶, 153,303 were wounded in action, 10,173 captured and missing in action. (Appy 6)⁷⁷ It is misleading to generalize the experiences of the men and women deployed to Vietnam. All personnel, with the exception of the marines, who had to stay in Vietnam for thirteen month⁷⁸, individually served a one-year tour of duty. (Appy 134-237) However, the war experience was different according to the time and place of the deployment. Stationed in four different 'Corps' (i.e. tactical areas) between the Demilitarized Zone along the seventeenth parallel in the North and the hot and humid Ca Mau Peninsula and the Mekong Delta in the South, the climate, the topography, and accordingly the kind of warfare varied considerably.

American units in the Mekong delta slogged week after week across paddies, occasionally tangling with Vietcong guerillas, while other units clashed with North Vietnamese regiments in big engagements in the highlands. Still others were continually peppered by snipers as they patrolled the perimeters of sprawling U.S. installations at Danang and Bienhoa and Camranh, and many more spent seemingly endless periods at lonely hilltop batteries, firing artillery shells at real or presumed enemy concentrations. Air force pilots could return from dangerous missions over North Vietnam to the relative comfort of their bases, and some lucky GIs drew assignments in Saigon [...]. (Karnow 464-465)

The average American male soldier was 19 year old, making the fighting force in Vietnam the youngest in American history. The social stratification of the male

⁷⁵John F. Kennedy: "Inaugural Address, 20th January, 1961," quoted in Ford 306.

⁷⁶ Not only American military personnel fought against the Communist forces in Vietnam. There were also the 'Free World Forces' from South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines, all in all about 60,000 soldiers. Appy 16.

⁷⁷ Of the 153,303 wounded, about 74,000 survived although they suffered grave permanent disabilities. Due to a very efficient rescue system, with fast air transport from the battlefield to the nearest field hospital by so-called 'dust-off' helicopters, and the well-equipped medical facilities wounded soldiers had a better chance of survival than in any previous war: only 19% died of their wounds, in contrast to 26.3% in the Korean War, and even 29.3% in the Second World War. See Steinman 14-15. - In April 1995, 2,207 American soldiers still were missing in Southeast Asia. - According to statistics publicized by Hanoi, 1,1 million Vietnamese fighting men and women were killed in action from 1954 through 1975. The figures of American and North Vietnamese killed and missing are taken from Tucker, "Casualties".

⁷⁸ For a brief account of the Vietnam experiences of the Marine corps see Brush.

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fighting force in Vietnam did not correlate to American society as a whole: about eighty percent of the soldiers came from working-class and poor families, while wealthy or well-educated young men were far less likely to enlist or to be drafted. The American personnel in Vietnam consisted of roughly one-third draftees, one-third 'true' volunteers, and one-third draft-motivated volunteers. Due to student deferments given to full-time undergraduate students and all graduate students, only six percent college graduates served in Vietnam. After the draft reform in 1969 that ended the deferment system and introduced the draft lottery, the number rose to ten percent. (Appy 6-36)⁷⁹

About ten percent of all soldiers in Vietnam, male and female, were African-Americans.⁸⁰ Only one out of seven soldiers belonged to a fighting unit while six others served in combat support. The public image of 'the Vietnam soldier' as member of a combat unit is misleading: "But because heavy combat is the norm in both popular and serious treatments of the war, the 'typical' vet [i.e. the soldier in combat support P.F.] is by no means typical in the public mind." (Bates, *Wars* 18) Soldiers in the rear lived in relatively comfortable circumstances in contrast to the infantrymen who were often deprived of the most basic necessities, sometimes even of food and water. (Appy 239-241) Nevertheless, it is true for all American personnel in Vietnam that guerilla fighters, snipers, bombs, traps, and mines constantly threatened them. The Vietnam war was a war without frontlines; consequently even the relative safety of the rear was treacherous. Both men and women, the rear echelons and the line units alike, experienced 'combat' at least on the receiving end, coming under some kind of attack during their stay in Vietnam. (Karnow 465)⁸¹

Female soldiers in Vietnam were slightly older than their male peers. The average age was 23, since they had to undergo a three-year education as nurses after their

⁷⁹ Draft-motivated volunteers had already received their induction notices or expected them in the near future. Thus they enlisted, hoping to have a greater influence on the nature and location of their service. The pressure of the draft became the most important reason to enlist. For an analysis of the distribution between cities and small communities, rural and urban America see Appy 11-15.

⁸⁰ An extensive analysis of the situation of African-American fighting men provides Appy 19-22. See also Feld.

⁸¹ For women see the different oral history collections, for example Walker, or Steinman.

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graduation from high school. They formed the youngest group of American medical personnel ever deployed to a war zone. (Steinman 20) Most women were raised in conservative, often Catholic, Christian families and went to Vietnam out of altruistic motives. Nevertheless, a romantic notion of war nursing as one of the adventures available to women also played a role for many. (Bates, Wars 163) Since there was no draft for women, all female soldiers were true volunteers. Nevertheless, not all women chose service in Vietnam but were deployed. Exactly how many women actually served in Vietnam between 1965 and 1973 is not known. Since the Department of Defense does not distinguish soldiers along gender lines, the accurate figures can only be estimated.⁸² The numbers vary depending on the source: while the Department of Defense states some 7,500 women were on active military duty in Vietnam, the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study by the Veterans' Administration in 1988 estimates a number of ten to eleven thousand. About eighty-seven percent of servicewomen in Vietnam served as nurses, mostly as first or second lieutenants in the army. Many joined the Women's Army Corps, most were enlisted personnel, and ninety percent were officers. Of all women who served in Vietnam, only about six percent suffered wounds.⁸³ About 1,500 women were in non-medical positions. They worked as secretaries for the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), in Saigon and on the large American bases, as air traffic controllers, photographers, cartographers, with the Army Signal Corps, in intelligence and other jobs requiring security clearance. Also, between 1967 and 1973 36 women Marines were on duty in Vietnam, mostly stationed in Saigon and working with the Marine Corps Personnel Section on the staff of the Commander, Naval Forces, Vietnam, providing administrative support to Marine forces. (Holm 424)

⁸² Kathryn Marshall and others interpret the fact that the files of women are not separated from men's as "a reminder of government mishandling of information during the Vietnam War [that] points to the more general belief that war is men's business." (4) or, more drastically, in feminist critic Renny Christopher's view, as "the lack of interest in the women who served in Vietnam" and the "ultimate indication of their invisibility." (35) A little more cautious in his judgement is Steinman: "The Pentagon was either gender-blind during Vietnam or the omission was deliberate. We will never know." (19) – The number of civilian women working in Vietnam is even more difficult to discern. Surveys indicate that the total of American women is between 33,000 and 55,000. See Marshall 4.

⁸³ The numbers are taken from Steinman 19-20, and from Holm 206.

II.2.1. WAR MAKES YOU A MAN; WAR MAKES YOU DEAD – Male Soldiers in Vietnam⁸⁴

Most American soldiers were ignorant about the political, social and climatic conditions they would encounter in Vietnam. Consequently, the arrival there was a shock. The heat, humidity, and mixture of pungent smells struck the men at once when deplaning the cool, comfortable, commercial airliner that had flown them into the war zone. Due to the one-year rotation system, each soldier arrived as individual replacement. Often the new troops encountered seasoned American soldiers on their way to board the 'Freedom Bird' home, who yelled insults and derogatory warnings at the newcomers.⁸⁵ This added to the fear, vulnerability, disorientation, and isolation most soldiers felt.

Depending on how urgent the need for a replacement was, the new soldiers either were immediately dispatched to their new unit or had a few days of in-country orientation. Many a soldier's tour of duty began with a double disappointment: neither the Vietnamese nor the fellow soldiers of his new unit greeted him with enthusiasm. In the beginning, many Americans took an interest in the new and strange Vietnamese culture, but the soldiers soon perceived that they were not so much hailed as liberators than welcomed as customers of an informal war-time Vietnamese 'industry' consisting of prostitutes, drug dealers, street peddlers, etc. The Americans also quickly encountered acts of passive or even open hostility. Since official propaganda had convinced them that they were in Vietnam to help the South Vietnamese fight off Communism and to help develop the country, many soldiers were deeply disappointed about the supposed ingratitude of the Vietnamese and came to indiscriminately distrust and despise them. (Appy 130-137)⁸⁶

⁸⁴ O'Brien, "True War Story" 77.

⁸⁵ For a description of the arrival and a rather extensive discussion of the different odors of Vietnam see Appy 117-130. - The tension-filled meeting between the two groups has become a common motif of Vietnam literature and films. For the new soldiers, the old soldiers presented a foreshadowing of what they would become, for the old soldiers the new arrivals were a vision of what they had been and of what they had lost: "fresh, open naivete and their youthful, bright eyes". 123.

⁸⁶ Fear and distrust of the Vietnamese produced a lot of Vietnam GI folklore, featuring soldiers who were hurt or even killed by civilians who were disguised Vietcong fighters. "Everyone heard stories about Vietnamese barbers who slit American throats, prostitutes who put razor blades in their vaginas to cut American soldiers, children who walked onto American bases with explosives strapped to their

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When the new soldier arrived at the unit he was assigned to, he was often greeted by his fellow soldiers with indifference, ironic comments, and constant reminders of his inexperience.⁸⁷ The soldier was appointed to whatever position was open through death or departure of a comrade. The seasoned soldiers took care of the newcomer, teaching him not to endanger the unit and how to survive. Many soldiers were brought up on images of Audie Murphy and John Wayne, western films and World War II movies, depicting the American soldier as the invincible, masculine hero and the American cause as always righteous. Thus, the most common advice given to the new guy was: "Don't try to be John Wayne."⁸⁸ Additionally, new soldiers were 'broken in'; they often had to undergo a ritual of initiation that taught them not to panic in a firefight and on exposure to death and mutilation but also contributed to the feeling of incompetence and humiliation.⁸⁹

Soldiers in combat units quickly realized that it was much more difficult if not impossible to defeat the North Vietnamese than official American propaganda would have it. American officials, military leaders, and many commanding officers continually claimed that America would not lose a war against, as President

stomachs, and soft drinks and beer that the VC adulterated with tiny pieces of glass to sell to thirsty Americans." Appy 136. There is only one article dealing with the Vietnamese variety of the 'Vagina Dentata': Gulzow and Mitchell.

⁸⁷ One soldier, for example, was welcomed with the words: "Oh, an FNG [fucking new guy – P.F]. Well, let's see. Hey Sarge! (he yelled) Who got hit last night?" Appy 138.

⁸⁸ There is an abundance of allusions to John Wayne in Vietnam literature. Ron Kovic provides in his autobiography *Born on the Fourth of July* a widely known example where he describes his feelings when he watched *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), starring John Wayne, as a young boy: "The Marine Corps hymn was playing in the background as we sat glued to our seats, humming the hymn together and watching Sergeant Stryker, played by John Wayne, charge up the hill and get killed just before he reached the top. And then they showed the men raising the flag on Iwo Jima with the marines' hymn still playing, and Castiglia and I cried in our seats. [...] John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* became one of my heroes." (54-55) Later on, back from Vietnam paralyzed permanently from his chest down, he concluded bitterly: "Yes, I gave my dead dick for John Wayne [...]" (112). It is also important to recognize the model of manhood that is conveyed through these films and TV series. Robert Jay Lifton, a pioneer in post-traumatic stress disorder research, "has described how the veterans in his rap group strove against what they called 'the John Wayne thing'. Yet they were hard-pressed to come up with an alternative model of manhood and often reverted to John Wayne postures in their antiwar activities." Bates, *Wars* 145. Nevertheless, although these cultural images contributed to the understanding of war as heroic and manly, Appy argues that they were hardly decisive in the decision to enlist. Rather, for most young men, economic and social reasons, the possibility to 'become someone' by joining the military, were the determining factors. Appy 62, 140.

⁸⁹ For an extensive description of such an initiation ritual see Appy 143-144. Even if the new soldier thought "he was going to die," he afterwards was thankful for the experience because it taught him "not to fall apart. [...] They had this thing about teaching a boot [soldier fresh out of boot camp – P.F.] exactly what he's got to deal with and how to accept the fact of where he really is." (144)

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Johnson said, a “raggedy-ass little fourth-rate country.” (Appy 146) But not only did the North Vietnamese forces control the war strategically and tactically, they could also rely on a wide-spread support net throughout South Vietnam. Villagers the Americans were supposedly saving from Communism planted mines and set traps, served as informers for the Communist forces, and even joined the Vietcong.⁹⁰ Additionally, numerous North Vietnamese came on the Ho Chi Minh Trail⁹¹ to fight in the South. The impossibility of telling friend from foe frustrated the American troops and led many to the conclusion that “the only good gook is a dead gook.” (Appy 137)⁹² American soldiers, torn by the conflict between official propaganda and every-day experience, soon had to acknowledge that despite superior American weapons and technology, the North Vietnamese forces almost always dictated the terms of engagement and chose the battleground. (Appy 144-147, 162-173)⁹³

As already mentioned above, the U.S military waged a war of attrition in which the daily body count provided the primary measure of success. To gain and hold territory was no military objective. American operations were conducted over and over in the same area at different times. Often the Communist forces evaded the Americans – in 1968, with American operations on the ground at their peak, not even one percent of combat patrols resulted in contact with the enemy. One soldier described this as his experience: “You go out on patrol maybe twenty times or more and nothin’, just nothin’. Then, the twenty-first time, zap, zap, zap, you get hit – and Victor Charlie fades into the jungle before you can close with him.” (Appy 163-164) The pressure to present dead Vietcong led many commanders to wildly

⁹⁰ See, for example, the account of a marine captain in Karnow 467.

⁹¹ The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a network of small trails, paths, roads, and underground tunnels that led from North Vietnam through the east of Laos to South Vietnam. It was the most important supply route on which men and materiel from the North reached the South. All U.S. attempts to block or destroy the Trail by air or ground attacks failed. See Leary. An account of the attempt to destroy the Trail by airpower provides Whitcomb.

⁹² This quote of course echoes the (in)famous saying that the only good Indian is a dead Indian, coined by General Sheridan during the war against the Plains Indians in 1868. The frontier experience and the fights against the Indians were a common cultural paradigm in which the Vietnam experience was perceived. See Bates, *Wars* 9-47. See also Slotkin.

⁹³ In 1972, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had to admit that “three-fourth of the battles are at the enemy’s choice of time, place, type, and duration.” Appy 163.

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exaggerate the body counts.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the statistics and seemingly precise reports pictured the war as highly rational and technocratically monitored and thus lent credibility to the conduct of the war and the war managers. (Gibson 124-125) The troops, however, were aware of the fact that body counts and statistics were no valid measure for progress but merely provided the illusion of control. This fact, together with the elusiveness of the enemy and the knowledge that most combat took place at close range particularly unnerved the American soldiers and led to the perception of Vietnam as “spooky.” (Herr 81)

Operations mostly followed a standard pattern: troops left the base camp on foot or were airlifted into a ‘hot’ – i.e. already surrounded by enemy forces that would open fire on the helicopter’s arrival - or ‘cold’ landing zone.⁹⁵ They stayed in the combat zone for days or even weeks patrolling the area. (Appy 176)⁹⁶

From dawn to dusk, the soldiers carried their gear and weapons over every kind of territory, be it rice paddies, swamps, hills, mountains, jungles, and in every kind of weather. In the dry season, temperatures above 100 degrees Fahrenheit were common in the lowlands. It could become freezing cold in the monsoon season that lasted from April to October and brought nearly incessant heavy rains. (Appy 152)⁹⁷ But not only the weather, but also the land itself seemed hostile to the Americans. The jungle was often so dense that the ‘point man’ at the head of the column had to cut through it with a machete. Instead of taking the easier but mostly mined way on the dikes, the soldiers chose to walk through the rice paddy, wading waist-deep in muddy water. In the highlands, the soldiers had to put up with the constant change of altitude, sometimes only being able to cover one or two kilometers per day.

⁹⁴ One of the major studies concluded that “American commanders exaggerated enemy body counts by 100 percent.” Appy 156. A good ‘kill-ratio’ and body count also determined field officers’ promotions, see Gibson 112-118. The officers even used their troops as bait in dangerous missions to achieve a high body count rate (117-120). See also Sorley. - The daily media briefings in Saigon by American military spokesmen were aptly called ‘Five O’Clock Follies’ because the press was aware of the falsified statistics they were provided with. See Frame.

⁹⁵ The helicopter was the most frequently used means of transportation and has become one of the major symbols of the Vietnam war, “the sexiest thing going” as Michael Herr put it in his masterpiece of New Journalism *Dispatches* (15). See also Appy 175.

⁹⁶ This was known as ‘humping the boonies.’ (Boonies is short for ‘boondocks’.)

⁹⁷ See also Mongelluzzo.

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Besides combat, the relentless heat claimed the most victims. Additionally, cuts received from the razor blade-sharp leaves of the tall Elephant Grass, foot diseases stemming from continually wet feet due to walking in rice paddies, and other illnesses related to the heat and humidity were common. Often units were not even able to carry enough drinking water. (Appy 177-178)⁹⁸

In addition to the physical exhaustion came the emotional strains. There was a constant fear of mines and ambushes. Out of sheer exhaustion and the boredom of marching days on end without enemy contact, the soldiers sometimes lost their fear of combat. Not even an occasional sniper shooting at them was able to alert them for more than a brief period of time. Worse, though, was not knowing about the destination and duration of the patrol. Since the primary goal was to find the enemy, orders were often changed from one minute to the next due to changing intelligence reports about the hiding place of Communist forces. Especially frustrating for the 'grunts' was the fact that even the Vietnamese civilians seemed to know the American orders in advance while the soldiers themselves were kept in the dark. (Appy 178-181)⁹⁹

When American units engaged in combat with Communist forces, commanders often called in supportive fire from artillery bases or fighter jets. Bombs, napalm, and rockets were supposed to be released upon the enemy. Unfortunately, the very device that was celebrated by the military as minimizing American casualties wounded and killed a considerable number of American soldiers. About eighteen percent of all American casualties resulted from misdirected 'friendly fire.'¹⁰⁰ Whenever possible, the American commanders tried to call in preparatory fire and air strikes on areas that were deemed dangerous, before they moved in. The air strikes also had important psychological effects, because they strengthened the soldiers' self-confidence, their sense of power and of being in control. But even if the Americans won the battle and drove off the guerilleros or the NVA they could

⁹⁸ For a vivid description of this ordeal see also Appy 180-181.

⁹⁹ Appy quotes an example concerning soldiers who were informed by Vietnamese prostitutes about a major operation some time in advance. This information proved to be quite precise – and the officers had not even mentioned the mission. (181)

¹⁰⁰ There are no statistics available on casualties from friendly fire, but this number can be deduced from the general statistics published by the Department of Defense. See Frame.

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never feel completely victorious; often by night the Communist forces regained the lost territory and tried to overrun the American compound. More often than not the American soldiers were able to fight off the North Vietnamese; they nevertheless “felt more like hunted than hunters, more like reactors than initiators, and more like defenders than aggressors.” (Appy 186, 190)

A common task for American soldiers on patrol was to search Vietnamese villages for Vietcong suspects, weapons, and supplies for the enemy. These searches often proved futile and rarely produced any information of importance. But the soldiers searched the huts for any sign of the enemy’s presence, hoping to “make the invisible visible, the intangible concrete”. Of course, the villagers, mostly women, children, and old men, resented the intrusion. Often American soldiers took the frustrations and anger out on the villagers. “To many GIs, these places and people came to represent the invisible guerillas, and when soldiers grew embittered over the loss of friends to sniper fire and booby traps, it was not uncommon for them to seek revenge by attacking whatever was closest.” (Appy 192-193)¹⁰¹ To burn down a village that was suspected to be a Vietcong hiding-place became nearly standard procedure.¹⁰² Atrocities against civilians were widespread.¹⁰³ It was next to impossible for the soldiers to distinguish Vietcong fighters from the civilian population, which led to the “unofficial rule of engagement: ‘If it’s dead and Vietnamese, it’s VC’.” (Appy 199)

Soldiers in jungle or remote mountain areas experienced a different kind of warfare. Since these areas were only thinly populated, the soldiers had much less contact with the civilian population. They rather engaged regular, uniformed North Vietnamese units than guerilla forces in battle, and were seldom confronted with the

¹⁰¹ See Appy 191-205.

¹⁰² There were even leaflets printed and dropped from helicopters on the villages, containing warnings not to cooperate with the Vietcong and portraying the threat to those people who did not obey in no uncertain terms. For an example of this piece of psychological warfare see Appy 196-197.

¹⁰³ The most publicly known incident is the My Lai Massacre. But many other soldiers have confessed to committing war crimes. See for example the documents of the nation-wide Winter Soldier Investigation, hearings organized by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War in early 1972 to contradict the Nixon administration’s view that My Lai was an isolated incident. See Vietnam Veterans Against the War. For an account of the development and results of the Winter Soldier hearings see Nicosia 73-102.

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problem of having to tell combatants from civilians. Nevertheless, for all American soldiers the contradiction between the official optimistic outlook on the war's progress and the realities of war confronted daily on the battlefields was obvious and irreconcilable. Many soldiers thus became increasingly suspicious of their own leaders. They felt that their sufferings counted for nothing and could safely be ignored by the war managers. For many, the war they were fighting was not theirs at all. (Appy 205, 215)

Often this suspicion grew into certainty as their tour of duty progressed. The lack of military success and progress, the lack of clearly defined goals and victories, and - especially in the later war years - the lack of purpose the soldiers experienced led to a nihilistic attitude about the war: "It don't mean nothing." (Appy 208) Furthermore, the growing debate in the United States about the legitimacy of the involvement in Vietnam put additional pressure on the soldiers. Although many war protestors carefully distinguished between the war and the warrior, the soldiers who were existentially involved in the war could no longer follow this distinction and separate their identity from the war.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, in the American forces in Vietnam opposition against the war grew. Especially after the disaster of 'Hamburger Hill' in May 1969¹⁰⁵, many officers were reluctant to order men to risk their lives. In the final years of the war many soldiers actively opposed the war by openly criticizing the military, refusing to follow orders, avoiding or outright refusing combat, 'sandbagging',¹⁰⁶ and even 'fragging' - i.e. killing - officers.

¹⁰⁴ The soldier's anger at the anti-war movement also resulted from the fact that they belonged primarily to the working class while the protestors were seen as "the spoiled, gutless middle class kids who crowded in college classrooms to escape the battlefield and who, to soothe their coward's consciences and regain their lost self-respect and their girlfriends' admiration now campaigned with ball-less envy to destroy what honor and prestige we might earn through our courage and sacrifices in battle." Appy 221.

¹⁰⁵ Dong Ap Bia Mountain saw some of the heaviest fighting between North Vietnamese regular forces and American units. For ten days the Americans tried to drive the NVA forces from their positions and to capture the well-fortified hill. Finally the hill was taken, on the price of 56 American dead and 420 wounded. The next day, the command decided to abandon the hill as strategically insignificant. The mountain gained the name Hamburger Hill because so many American casualties were horribly maimed and wounded.

¹⁰⁶ 'Sandbagging' meant that the unit took cover in a safe area and called in feigned situation reports from time to time. Especially night patrols that were considered dangerous were often sandbagged. Appy 244-245.

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Racial conflicts that had played only a minor role in the early war years also increased.¹⁰⁷

For many soldiers, the comradeship and solidarity among the front unit members provided the only meaningful experience of their entire tour of duty. “We realized collectively we had nothing to fight for, that nobody cared about us, and we didn’t give a shit about them. Our sense of motivation was a buddy system: ‘we are in this and nobody cares, but at least we can care about each other’.” (Appy 242) Nevertheless, this combat family was forged due to the danger and violence of a war that had no meaning in itself. On their return home or when transferring to assignments in the rear, many soldiers suffered from survivor’s guilt because they had left their buddies behind in danger. Additionally, many soldiers saw the war’s conduct and outcome as their personal responsibility. They had to learn to share that responsibility with society at large. (Appy 243, 321)

The United States were called ‘the world’ by the troops in Vietnam. This term signifies the essential difference between the familiar, meaningful reality at home and the strange, surreal, pointless, contradicting realities of the war zone no longer comprehensible by the familiar orientation points of American culture, morality, or rationality. (Appy 250) Constructing Vietnam as a netherworld became essential for the soldiers’ psychological adjustment to the war:

It offered men the illusion that the war existed in a physical and moral vacuum. It allowed them to interpret (and justify) their individual responses to the war as necessary and temporary reactions to an unreal environment. Soldiers made uneasy by their responses to the war tried to assure themselves that their individual transformations were not irrevocable. Perhaps they were not even real changes. After all, if the war itself seemed like an illusion, maybe one’s own participation was illusory as well. In any case, wartime identities, according to this reasoning, might be quickly dropped upon return to The World [...] changes were simply short-term, reasonable responses to an insane world, not permanent alterations in their identities. (Appy 250)

The desire to preserve one’s pre-war personal identity unscathed was widespread, but it often turned out to be untenable after the return home. Vietnam veterans faced indifference, uneasiness, or outright hostility in America’s post-war society.

¹⁰⁷ The experiences and problems encountered by African-American service personnel are described in Westheider.

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Additionally, many were haunted by their memories of the war, suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder¹⁰⁸, from drug addiction stemming from the time in Vietnam, where drugs were easily and cheaply available,¹⁰⁹ from exposure to Agent Orange¹¹⁰, and other war-related illnesses. What ailed veterans most was the twofold alienation of doing things they had not thought themselves capable of while fighting in a war they could neither win nor identify with. Many soldiers felt that they had not only lost the war but themselves and their own identity that was intertwined with the war itself. The participation in anti-war veterans' groups had a healing effect on the psyche of many former soldiers. The reconstruction of their identities in autobiographical accounts served as a further means of 'healing' and coming to terms with their war experiences. (Nicosia 173)¹¹¹

II.2.2. IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE – Female Soldiers in Vietnam¹¹²

Female soldiers in Vietnam experienced the war under conditions of service that were different from those of their male peers in combat units and in the rear. Since most of the women belonged to medical units, they had to deal with a stream of mutilated, wounded, and dying GIs to an extent that only very few male soldiers had to endure.¹¹³ Nevertheless, the female soldiers shared many convictions and much of the psychological make-up of their male comrades.

Like their male peers, female soldiers served an individual one-year tour of duty. Generally as ignorant about the country as the male soldiers, they were often

¹⁰⁸ See Shay 166-169.

¹⁰⁹ See Dubberly. According to a Department of Defense study, in 1968 one half of all male soldiers in Vietnam used drugs, mostly marihuana. After Tet, the number rose considerable to more than 605, in 1973 even 70% testified to drug use. The most common drug was marihuana, followed by amphetamines. Opium, heroin and other narcotics were seldom used since they made the user tired, which was dangerous on patrols. After the soldiers had returned from the war, 93% of first-time narcotics users and 86% of marihuana users stopped completely using drugs.

¹¹⁰ For the long struggle of the Vietnam veterans to get compensated for illnesses related to their exposure to Agent Orange see Nicosia 434-505 and 556-604.

¹¹¹ See Shay 183-194.

¹¹² Saywell, 225. – For a brief general overview on women in Vietnam see Spinrad, and for nurses especially Keen-Payne.

¹¹³ The exceptions, of course, were male nurses, technicians, and doctors.

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appalled by the unexpected climate, smells, and poverty of Vietnam. Initially, many women were interested in Vietnamese culture, and tried to establish relations with Vietnamese civilians. But soon they too were confronted with the hostility of many South Vietnamese and their lack of enthusiasm for the Americans and the anticommunist cause. Many women soon developed an antipathy to the people and displayed racist attitudes similar to those of male American soldiers, also referring to the Vietnamese as 'gooks' or 'dinks'. In contrast to the altruistic stereotype of the nurse and the general image of the non-violent, forgiving woman, female soldiers often shared their male counterparts' anger and hate for the Vietnamese. In some cases, nurses even wanted to avenge the deaths of American soldiers on wounded Vietnamese prisoners of war they were supposed to be caring for. (Bates, *Wars* 163-165)

A few days after their arrival in Vietnam, the nurses were sent to their first station of duty at one of the nineteen medical facilities scattered throughout South Vietnam.¹¹⁴ Often, there were no provisions for female soldiers, and women "considered themselves lucky if their assigned base had latrines and showers set aside for women and the base exchange carried a supply of feminine hygiene products." (Bates, *Wars* 163)

The nurses were not prepared for the workload and the extraordinary conditions they had to face. There was no time to adjust to the difficulties of wartime nursing. The medical facilities in Vietnam were connected with a specific unit or fire base. Usually the hospital staff was notified of major operations and of the estimated number of casualties in advance. When the wounded arrived, the primary goal was to operate on and stabilize the soldiers and to evacuate them as soon as possible to better-equipped large military hospitals at bases in Japan or in Danang. When the helicopters arrived with the wounded, triage was often performed right on the helicopter pad. Nurses and doctors decided which patients were wounded so badly that they needed treatment at once, which could wait, and which were expectants, i.e. too severely wounded to survive. Due to lack of time or personnel to treat all casualties, they often had to decide against trying to save a soldier. (Saywell 232)

¹¹⁴ For a map of the hospitals in Vietnam see Davidoff 14.

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The nurses dealt daily with traumatic amputations,¹¹⁵ napalm and white phosphorus burns, all kinds of shotgun and mine wounds, supplemented by contagious fevers of unknown origin. “What the nurses saw in those operating rooms was an unrelenting procession of the bits and pieces of people arriving from the battlefields. What they felt, working twelve-hour shifts in a kind of ‘twilight zone’ removed from the war yet dealing with its effects, was a sense of unreality, of helplessness, and anger.”(Saywell 225) The nurses soon perceived that “Vietnam was not John Wayne on the beach at Iwo Jima. [...] It was more like a grotesque form of ‘can you top this,’ because each time you thought you’d seen the ultimate, something else would come along.” (Marshall 29) These experiences finally forced nurses to repress and numb their emotions. Many avoided talking with the soldiers about their personal lives, even learning their names so that they would be able to view their patients merely as bodies and not as people. This enabled them to do their work while preserving their sanity. (Bates, *Wars* 163, 256)

Like the male soldiers, women grew more and more disillusioned as their tour of duty progressed. The official explanations for the involvement in Vietnam were not sufficiently convincing to justify the amount of suffering nurses witnessed, both by the American GIs and by Vietnamese civilians. The war seemed insane and out of control, and the government either ignorant or consciously lying, and therefore mendacious. (Mithers 77) To suppress the personal experiences and to endure the contradictions inherent in the war, many nurses used drugs, chain-smoked, and drank heavily in their leisure time, either alone or with their comrades, and partied intensely with the other medical personnel. Many also got romantically involved with male soldiers or doctors. But those relationships were abruptly broken off when the tour of duty of either partner ended. Other nurses saw the men they had been dating brought into the hospital as casualties. Thus, most nurses preferred short-term occasional affairs and avoided engaging in long-term relationships. (Bates, *Wars* 163-164) Similar to their male peers in fighting units, many women described the intense comradeship as one of the most impressive and meaningful experiences of their entire tour of duty. (Mithers 76) However, women could not escape the negative and threatening aspect of living in the predominately male

¹¹⁵ Traumatic amputation means that the soldier’s limbs had been torn off, mostly by a mine or bomb.

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military system: many were sexually harassed by Americans and reported “incidents ranging from pranks to threats of military discipline for refusing sex.” (Bates, *Wars* 165)¹¹⁶ Thus, women sometimes tried to avoid officers’ clubs and invitations by fellow soldiers or officers and rather tried to keep to themselves when off duty. (Bates, *Wars* 165)

Many nurses judged their tour of duty as the most demanding and at the same time the most satisfying year of their professional career. Due to the constant lack of doctors and the overload of patients, nurses quickly learned to independently carry out many tasks usually performed by doctors. For many, Vietnam represented the peak of professionalism, and any stateside employment with the strict hierarchical delineation of duties paled in comparison.¹¹⁷ Nurses also experienced a nearly constant adrenaline rush while working in Vietnam. They came home as “adrenaline junkies.” (Walker 18) Therefore, for the nurses being in the war zone meant not only constant exposure to death and mutilation, but also excitement and an intense feeling of being alive, emotions that are comparable to the feelings described in accounts of male soldiers when going into battle.¹¹⁸ Nurses felt strong and capable, they were in charge and carried responsibility, and they were “so highly skilled you can do everything blindfolded with your hands tied behind your back.” (Marshall 223)

Female veterans experienced and subsequently described their situation as being in combat - only “[they] couldn't shoot back.” (Marshall 132) Hospitals were not exempt from being attacked by North Vietnamese forces. Officially classified as non-combatants, women were not allowed to carry weapons and thus were not able to defend themselves. The first out of the eight military women killed in Vietnam, First Lieutenant Sharon Lane, died during an enemy attack on the Evacuation

¹¹⁶ Sexual harassment of female soldiers is still an important topic today. In a 1988 survey by the Department of Defense, 64% of servicewomen testified to having been subjected to unwanted sexual behavior. In 1995, 55% of the female service personnel reported sexual harassment. For more detailed figures and a comprehensive survey of sexual harassment in the American military see Sadler 49-51.

¹¹⁷ Nurses, for example, closed wounds after surgery, performed emergency tracheotomies, administered medication and even performed small operations on their own. In contrast, in a stateside hospital after the war they were quickly reminded that “giving an aspirin was considered beyond the nurse’s domain.” Friedman and Rhoads 4.

¹¹⁸ See for example Herr 56-57.

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Hospital at Chu Lai where she was stationed.¹¹⁹ Women in other positions also constantly lived with the threat of being killed by enemy fire, bombs, grenades, or mines.¹²⁰ Some of the female soldiers were also exposed to Agent Orange and other defoliants causing genetic and birth defects in their children.¹²¹

After their return to the states, the women encountered the same problems as male veterans: they were confronted with indifference and even hostility by their families and American society as a whole. (Bates, *Wars* 164) Women veterans also had difficulties readjusting to civilian life and keeping stable jobs, and many suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In contrast to male veterans, many women, military as well as civilian, additionally felt that they were not entitled to call themselves veterans and had no right to their troubled emotions because they had not experienced what society, the military, and many male veterans saw as 'the real war': combat.

The problems of female soldiers were not taken into consideration by any veterans' organization until Vietnam nurse Lynda Van Devanter founded the women's branch of the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) in 1979. In the 1980s, women veterans were enabled to voice their experiences, e.g. in response to Lynda Van Devanter's autobiography, to articles on women veterans, and to the building of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in 1982. Many went through a period of psychotherapy, and were able to establish a measure of reconciliation with their past.

¹¹⁹ For more information regarding Sharon Lane see Bigler's biography.

¹²⁰ The names of the fallen female soldier are inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C.

¹²¹ A short passage on women veterans and the effects of Agent Orange can be found in Nicosia 618.

II.3. WE ARE YOUR SONS, AMERICA – The Changes in the Public Discourse about the War and the Veterans¹²²

The American public discourse about the Vietnam War and the image of the veterans has changed significantly since the end of the war. As the war progressed, it was regarded in wide circles of American society not only as wrong and ill-conceived, but as imperialistic, immoral, and evil. The American government increasingly lost credibility and support, especially after the disclosure of the My Lai massacre and the publication of the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971. Although many anti-war protesters carefully distinguished between the war, the warriors, and the war managers,¹²³ especially after the truth about My Lai had become known the soldiers were often accused of being 'baby-killers' and asked how it felt to kill human beings. Although the majority of veterans were able to reintegrate themselves into society without any problems, the stereotypes of veterans as heroin addicts and brutal murderers of innocent Vietnamese women and children pervaded the public perception of the returning troops. (Baritz 314-315) Veterans often testified to being abused for their military attire, haircut, or medals, and even to being spat upon.¹²⁴

¹²² The quote is taken from W.D. Ehrhart's famous poem "A Relative Thing": "We are the ones you sent to fight a war / you did not know a thing about - / those of us that lived / have tried to tell you what went wrong. / Now you think you do not have to listen. / Just because we will not fit / into the uniforms of photographs / of you at twenty-one / does not mean you can disown us. / We are your sons, America, / and you cannot change that. / When you awake, / we will still be there." Excerpt, quoted from Ehrhart, *Carrying the Darkness* 96-97.

¹²³ In a study conducted by Frey-Wouters and Laufer in the late 1970s which included 1,159 men – but no women - of the 'Vietnam generation' it was asked: "Who should be prosecuted for unlawful acts committed in the Vietnam war?", and the participants could chose between 'Politicians,' 'Senior Officers,' 'Officers with operational command,' and 'Soldiers.' The soldiers were deemed the least responsible with a wide margin to the officers. "[...] a clear distinction is consistently made between the responsibility of soldiers on the one side and officers and political leaders on the other. [...] A majority of those respondents who discussed the responsibility of combat soldiers noted that judgments and decisions are extremely difficult for soldiers in the field." 284. Tables 9.26 and 9.27: 373.

¹²⁴ The only monograph available on the subject of spat-upon veterans is provided by Lembcke. He claims that the image of the spat-upon veteran is inaccurate, since the relations between veterans and anti-war activists were generally friendly. He argues that there is no "news-source documentation" (3) that shows veterans being abused in this fashion. Rather, the image of the veteran humiliated by anti-war activists was used in 1991 by the Bush administration "to discredit the opposition and galvanize support for the war [in the Gulf, PF]." (2). He also argues that the reports of veterans themselves of being spat upon came years after the incident, while at the time of the homecoming there were no reports of such instances. He concludes: "On the basis of that provable truth, I argue that the image of spat-upon veterans must be false." (4). In 1985, Baritz had already written that the image of spat-upon veterans was "a mass delusion." (315). Nevertheless, it has become a common motif of Vietnam war literature and features in many oral histories and autobiographies.

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After the end of the war, American society was eager for the war to be over and done with and to return to normality. Veterans thus faced a situation that was new to American returning soldiers: “The nation did not know what to do with them, and would just as soon forget, or try to forget, the entire sorry ‘episode.’” (Baritz 315) Along with this tendency to forget the war there was also the tendency to forget the warriors. In stark contrast to the welcome for the soldiers returning from the battlefields of the Second World War, there was no official welcome or homecoming parade for Vietnam veterans. Instead, the GI Bill was cut by Nixon, and the Veterans’ Administration hospitals were often unable to provide even basic care for the returning soldiers. (Nicosia 283-291, 305-306)¹²⁵ The “self-conscious, collective amnesia” (Herring 264) America indulged in was easy to maintain in the second half of the 70s: The anti-war movement dispersed and the most active veterans’ organization, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, was inhibited by political in-fights and discredited by the dominance of communist groups in the organization. (Nicosia 210-282)

Furthermore, the first lost war confronted American society with questions hitherto unknown in a country certain of its moral and military supremacy. The nation had to find a way to deal with this unique experience that disrupted the national narrative of the United States. “In every American epoch, and particularly during moments of national crisis, writers and thinkers have revised New England Puritanism to assess the evils or achievements of their own days.” (Bates, *Wars* 12) But the outcome of the Vietnam War was not easily integrated into those traditional national perceptions of Americans as God’s Chosen People and America as “redeemer nation.” (Lembcke 136) The “city upon a hill” had truly become a “story and a by-word through the world” and the American nation a “house divided” by questions of responsibility and guilt.¹²⁶ On the personal level, many people wanted to forget their often painful memories of the Sixties. (Buzzanco 147) Their tendency

¹²⁵ Ron Kovic paints a vivid picture of the horrible conditions in the infamous Bronx VA hospital in his autobiography *Born on the Fourth of July* (39). As early as May 1970, *Life* magazine ran a story about conditions in that VA hospital called “Our Forgotten Wounded”, “that rocked the nation.” Nicosia 62.

¹²⁶ Quotes from John Winthrop: “A Model of Christian Charity”, quoted in Mitchell 2: 282-295, and Abraham Lincoln.

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to deny the wounds of war, most visible in the many wounded and permanently disabled veterans, may have been amplified by the “cosmetic culture” of the 70s, which idealized health, fitness and fashion, and emphasized an image of “wholeness” which many Vietnam veterans were unable to conform to both physically and psychologically.¹²⁷

During the late 1970s and the 1980s, the image of the Vietnam veteran changed radically: In the course of just one decade the male veteran was recast as the only legitimate spokesperson on the war. Having participated in the war became the single decisive factor in establishing the legitimacy and ability to tell the ‘truth’ about it. (Beattie 8)

In the late 1970s, a few articles and surveys began to appear that dealt with the issue of veterans’ war-related problems. In 1978, one article in particular, by therapist Jeffrey Jay, argued that the “veteran’s conflicts are not his alone, but are bound to the trauma and guilt of the nation. And our failure to deal with our guilt renders the veteran the symptom-carrier for society and increases his moral and emotional burden.” The solution, he suggested, would be for American society to share that burden. Since society had denied the veterans meaning in their lives and their service, and “squandered the idealism and commitment of these men,” it could give back meaning to the sacrifices of the soldiers by “seeing value in their service.” (Nicosia 382) In the following year, Congress declared the week from May 28 through June 3, 1979 as ‘Vietnam Veterans Week.’ President Carter, although not willing to honor the veterans with a White House dinner, agreed to an afternoon reception on May 30. On this occasion Carter also presented a commemorative postage stamp. In October 1979, after six years of lobbying by veterans’ groups, the federal program ‘Operation Outreach’ was launched by the Carter administration. It was the first program that recognized the prolonged war-related problems of Vietnam veterans. Ninety-one walk-in counseling centers opened nationwide. These storefront vet centers, staffed entirely by Vietnam veterans, provided help, psychological counseling, and therapy groups. Many former Vietnam soldiers for the first time found a community of fellow veterans. Although some veterans’

¹²⁷ See Lasch.

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organizations denounced the centers as “too little too late,” they for the first time brought national attention and recognition to the war-related problems of veterans. (Nicosia 362-394) At about the same time, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was officially recognized as an illness stemming from traumatic war experiences.¹²⁸

The most influential factor in the reinterpretation of the image of the war and the warrior in public perception in the eighties was the rise of the ‘new right’, manifested in the election of California governor Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1981. His predecessor Jimmy Carter had been able to reach a conclusion to the 444 day-long captivity of American hostages in Iran just hours before he left the White House. But his public image had been damaged beyond repair by the unsuccessful rescue mission in April 1979. The United States appeared weak, and again unable to deal successfully with an underdeveloped country. The president seemed to be indecisive and lacking “brains and gumption.” Reagan, the ex-actor “who knew the value of good theatrics,” saw the chance to turn the end of the crisis into a display of national unity and strength. (Nicosia 395) He flew the hostages home in his own jet, and gave them a “hero’s welcome” (Appy 3) at the White House. They were greeted with ticker-tape parades in Washington and New York, and were awarded gold medals and financial compensation for each day of their captivity by Congress. (Nicosia 395) This reception stood in stark contrast to the return of the Vietnam soldiers, who received no parades or ceremonies, struggled for adequate psychological and medical care,¹²⁹ had to deal with reduced educational benefits, and lacked job training programs. The homecoming of the hostages “tapped feelings that had much of their origin in the final years of Vietnam. At some level, perhaps most unconsciously, Americans greeted the hostages so enthusiastically because their return marked precisely the sort of formal, collective, and ritual ending the Vietnam War lacked.” (Nicosia 3) The Vietnam veterans began to speak out “like a dam breaking.” (Nicosia

¹²⁸ This was marked by the inclusion of a definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder into the new *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual (DSM III)*, published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. When the first draft was issued in 1978, it led to radical changes in the treatment of Vietnam veteran patients, and initiated further research and new treatment methods. It also had an immense political impact and accelerated the approval of the Outreach Program in Congress. See Nicosia 202-209.

¹²⁹ Despite his alleged commitment to the veteran cause which he had emphasized during his election campaign, Reagan already had plans to close the Vet Centers within six months of their opening and to terminate Operation Outreach. See Nicosia 397-402.

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396-397) They appeared on national television programs and leading magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* featured stories about the problems of readjustment the veterans had to deal with. (Nicosia 401-402) The return of the hostages “provided a model of celebratory nationalism [...] that required no searching examination of the events giving rise to the crisis.” (Appy 3)

At the same time, in the early eighties a new conservatism in politics arose. Especially after Reagan was elected president, the generation that had turned its back to the Vietnam veterans was labeled ‘rebels without a cause’: “Youths were disrespectful, blacks were ungrateful, women were too ambitious [...]” (Buzzanco 248) and since then America had been ‘slouching towards Gomorrah.’¹³⁰ For the new right, the backlash against the Sixties became a central theme of their program. The new right favored an interpretation of the Vietnam War that exculpated the individual soldier and those who had instigated the war and found guilty the anti-war movement, the press, and the political liberals who lacked courage and determination to win. (Buzzanco 248, Appy 4, Beattie 21) President Reagan embraced this American stab-in-the-back-legend: “[The fighting men] came home without a victory, not because they’d been defeated, but because they’d been denied permission to win.” (Holm 206) This legend also served to reinterpret the end of the war not as loss but as betrayal, and thus the warrior not as loser, let alone as ‘baby-killer,’ but as innocence betrayed. In line with this reinterpretation and mythologization of the war was Reagan’s emphasis on the rescue of American prisoners of war (POWs) supposedly still incarcerated in Southeast Asia. The exchange of all POWs was part of the peace agreement between the U.S. and North Vietnam, (Berman 251)¹³¹ and no American soldier missing in action (MIA) was held prisoner after 1973. Nevertheless, Nixon and Kissinger already had promoted this issue in order to be able to hold back economic aid for the reconstruction of North Vietnam that had been agreed on in the Paris peace treaty. In 1980, retired Special Forces colonel James Gritz organized raids into Laos to find supposed POWs with clandestine financial aid from the Reagan administration,¹³² of course to

¹³⁰ Hence the title of Robert H. Bork’s polemical book.

¹³¹ See also chapter II.1. of this study.

¹³² Gritz said he accepted the mission because both “Teddy Roosevelt and John Wayne are dead.” (Franklin, *Vietnam* 189) Nevertheless, other action heroes were still around: William Shatner,

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no avail. (Franklin, *Vietnam* 187-190) Nevertheless, Reagan pronounced the MIA/POW issue as “the highest national priority.” (Franklin, *Vietnam* 190)¹³³ The mythologization of the POWs and MIAs could draw heavily on frontier myths central to American identity: both evoked images of white captives in the hands of bloodthirsty, cruel, uncivilized ‘Reds,’ be it Indians or Communists.¹³⁴ In the early 1980s, “Vietnam [was] in the process of being reconstructed as a story of universal victimization”: not only the Vietnamese were the war’s victims, but also the American soldiers who were betrayed by their own government and by American society which did not welcome them home and honor their service. The American nation as a whole was the victim of politicians and bureaucrats, and suffered from the war both at home and abroad. (Elshtain 218) Reagan in his speeches contrasted ‘us’ with ‘them’; ‘them’ being those powers who were responsible for the war. Although Reagan avoided naming names, he nevertheless thus rhetorically united ‘us’ – “the people – veterans and non-veterans, vocal anti-war protestors and silent supporters of the war, whites and blacks [sic]. Indeed, a feature of the construction of unity within such representations is that government bureaucrats are demonized as the cause of the war while ‘the people’ are represented as unified against them.” (Beattie 24-25)

When on November 13, 1982 the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall was unveiled on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., the “universal victimization” of Vietnam veterans was carved in black granite.¹³⁵ The memorial lists the names of about

Star Trek’s Captain Kirk, provided \$10,000 and got the movie rights for Gritz’s story, Clint ‘Dirty Harry’ Eastwood donated \$30,000 and got a crucial role in the adventure. He was to be the bearer of good news to the “good president” Reagan (190). Unfortunately, the whole mission turned out to be impossible, when Gritz’s team was ambushed and forced to flee from Laos back to Thailand. And, of course, no POWs were found.

¹³³ At about the same time, in 1983, the first POW rescue movie, *Uncommon Valor*, starring Gene Hackman, appeared in the cinemas. At first ridiculed by reviewers as boring and full of “comic-strip-level heroism,” the film turned out to be the surprise box office success of the year. As one moviegoer declared “with satisfaction at the bloody ending in which dozens of the enemy are mowed down by the Americans, ‘We get to win the Vietnam War.’” Franklin, *Vietnam* 192. For a discussion of the POW rescue movies see for example Williams, and Wimmer; more general McKeever. – In 1984, the best-known autobiography by a former POW appeared, written by James and Sybil Stockdale. The most complete collection of narratives by former POWs is provided by Zalin Grant.

¹³⁴ For the frontier myth in the context of the Vietnam war see for example Bates, *Wars* 9-47, for the classic study to date on the frontier in American thought and identity see Slotkin.

¹³⁵ The founders of the Memorial Project decreed that the design of the memorial should “make no political statement about the war.” Quoted from *Monuments & Memorials: Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, website: <http://www.kreative.net/cooper/TourOfDC/monuments/VVM>. Text by The National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Copyright by Thaddeus O. Cooper, 1996, 1997,

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58,000 male and eight female American dead. The fact that the names are arranged chronologically in the order of the date of casualty shows the Vietnam War as a series of individual human sacrifices, and distances the war from its socio-political context. By emphasizing the individual sufferings and the personal losses of the veterans, the Wall also strengthens an a-historical and apolitical view of the war.¹³⁶ The design of the Wall invites silence and mourning. Thus, emotions that are appropriate for the individuals who suffered loss and affliction during the war are presented as a valid representation of the Vietnam experience for the nation as a whole. Political responsibility and personal failure disappear in a monumental show of grief that abuses the dead and their families once again.¹³⁷ The very location of the memorial next to the Lincoln Memorial on the Mall signifies the attempt to reintegrate the Vietnam veterans into society and the Vietnam war into the national narrative of America. Thus, the remembrance of the dead in the memorial functions to assert the innocence of America in the war and to forge and strengthen national unity. (Beattie 42)

When on Memorial Day 1984 Reagan, presiding over the interment of the Unknown Soldier from Vietnam, declared: "We may not know his name, but we

1998. For an account of the process that led to the building of the Wall by the initiators see Scruggs and Swerdlow.

¹³⁶ Sturken's comment clarifies the wide range of interpretations the memorial encourages: "To the

veterans, the memorial makes amends for their treatment since the war; to the families and friends of those who died, it officially recognizes their sorrow and validates a grief that was not previously sanctioned; to others, it is either a profound antiwar statement or an opportunity to recast the narrative of the war in terms of honor and sacrifice." (75).

¹³⁷ The individualistic, ahistorical, and apolitical design of the Wall was criticized by the well-known author and Vietnam veteran William D. Ehrhart, who warns that the Wall "tells us only what each of us chooses to hear. It precludes discussion or critique or wisdom, as though its dark polished face is all we will ever need to know, or ought to know, about the Vietnam War." Ehrhart, who in his poem "Invasion of Grenada" opts for "an end to monuments," emphasizes the threat of neglecting important issues of the war. These issues concern, for example, the military and political achievements in relation to the sufferings of Americans and Vietnamese, the long duration of the war, the non-acknowledgement of the names of the Vietnamese dead on the Wall. Ehrhart, "Who's Responsible? Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, Popular Culture and the Gulf War," 209-210. - There is in fact a sculpture called "The Other Vietnam Memorial," created in 1991 by the artist Chris Burden as a reaction to the non-acknowledgement of the 3 million Indochina dead. It consists of large copper leaves inscribed with 3 million Vietnamese names. Because the artist was not able to get a proper listing of the dead he repeated 4,000 names over and over again. He commented about the Wall and his own motivation for creating another memorial: "Even though I feel sorry for the individuals named on [the Vietnam Veterans Memorial], I was repulsed by the idea. I couldn't help but think that we were celebrating our dead, who were aggressors, basically, and wonder where were the Vietnamese names?" Sturken 83.

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know his courage. He is the heart, the spirit, and the soul of America”, he also rhetorically laid to rest the old image of the Vietnam veteran humiliated and marginalized by American society. (Jeffords 125) The figure of Vietnam soldier, thus depoliticized and dehistoricized, finally became available for a reinterpretation that did not just bring him back into the middle of American society. It also changed the image of the veteran from victim to survivor-hero that brought about “the remasculinization of America.”¹³⁸

At about the same time when President Reagan buried the soldier-victim, Frederick Hart's statue, commonly called ‘Three Fighting Men,’ was erected south of the Wall as an addition to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It shows three male soldiers in full combat gear, supposedly returning from the field. Their features characterize one of them as being black, one white, and one hispanic, suggesting that Americans fought in Vietnam irrespectively of their origin or background. Additionally, the Star-Spangled Banner flies over the memorial, the base of the flagpole is surrounded by the insignia of the different branches of the military. Hart's ‘Three Fighting Men’ is a traditional realistic war memorial, in which “the veterans and the dead are subsumed into a singular narrative.” (Sturken 57) Its aesthetics resembles the Marine Corps War Memorial at Arlington that depicts the raising of the American flag on Iwo Jima. The ‘Three Fighting Men’ thus implies an interpretation of the war that stands in stark contrast to that of the Wall: it does not remember loss and destruction but underlines aspects of patriotism, youth, strong male bonds forged under fire, willingness to make sacrifices for the country, strength, and conviction to fight for the right cause. It memorializes the survivors of the war rather than its dead. It thus signifies the reinterpretation of the war in traditional patriotic patterns. The soldiers were now hailed for their sacrifices and their adherence to ‘my country right or wrong.’

The change in public perception was also brought about, and at the same time reflected in, the popular media. Rambo, the rescuer of POWs forgotten by their country's leaders, became one of the most prominent figures in America. He did not

¹³⁸ This phrase is borrowed from Jeffords' book.

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only embody the mythical frontiersman who can merge with the country,¹³⁹ command the physical powers of American heroes like Tarzan, and fight for “truth, justice, and the American Way” like Superman. He also “projects a fantasy in which the audience gets to violate the enemies of everyday life [...]. American men find their surrogates both in the POWs who embody humiliated, betrayed, enslaved American manhood and in the warrior hero who can rescue them when he escapes the imprisonment of post-Vietnam America.” (Franklin, *Vietnam* 194)¹⁴⁰ The Rambo image even pervaded politics: President Reagan imagined himself as Rambo when he made his now-famous statement: “Boy, I saw *Rambo* last night. Now I know what to do the next time this [an incident like the capturing of American hostages in Beirut in 1985, PF] happens.” (Franklin, *Vietnam* 194)

The reception of the Iranian hostages, the political reinterpretation of the Vietnam war as a good cause gone awry due to lily-livered liberals, the misled media and the Communist-controlled anti-war movement, the rise of the POW/MIA myth and its promotion in the popular media all contributed to the shift in the public perception of the Vietnam veterans. Additionally, by honoring them,

no matter how superficially, the culture seemed to be struggling to find a way to both accept and contain the very people who had the potential to reopen the pain of the war most fully. Accordingly, veterans were typically presented in ways akin to the hostages, as survivor-heroes. Indeed, throughout the Reagan years people who suffered terrible ordeals at the hands of foreigners or in the name of the United States were accorded the status of heroes. [...] By focusing on what people suffered or endured in foreign lands (or in space) you need not examine what they were doing there in the first place. By this standard, Vietnam veterans seemed the ultimate survivor-heroes. After all, as the typical treatment went, these were men who had endured jungle rot, malaria,

¹³⁹ Interestingly enough, Rambo is of part Indian, part German descent, “a hell of a combination.” Franklin, *Vietnam* 193.

¹⁴⁰ Rambo became not only a mythic figure, but also a quite real factor in American business: besides merchandising articles there were even “‘Rambo-Grams,’ messages delivered by headbanded musclemen sporting bandoliers across their bare chests.” Further, a *Rambo* TV cartoon series for children ages 5-12, and even several pornographic *Rambo* spin-offs were to be had. Ibid., p. 195. At the same time, the ‘new’ reintegrated Vietnam veteran was presented on prime-time TV: “By 1982, the deranged killer Vietnam vet had been supplanted by the sexy, charismatic figure of Tom Selleck starring in *Magnum P.I.* That TV show, a consistent winner in the ratings, had as its hero a big, tough, handsome, and good-hearted Hawaiian private investigator named Thomas Magnum. As columnist Bob Greene observed: ‘It is never stated that he was a Vietnam soldier – but the implication is there.’ The fact that Magnum’s Vietnam service was underplayed served to reinforce the positive sense that he was ‘reintegrated into society again.’ Greene went so far as to claim that Selleck’s graceful performance had led to Vietnam veterans being ‘considered the manliest, gutsiest, most courageous folks in America’.” Nicosia, *Home to War*, p. 489.

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poisonous snakes, booby traps, invisible enemies, spitting war protestors, and other unimaginable horrors. (Appy 3-4)

At the close of the decade, American society had arrived at an acceptable and convenient interpretation of the war that reconstructed “a lost identity of triumph.” (Englehardt 14-15) During the 1990s, this interpretation prevailed and was reinforced by the Gulf War. On March 2, 1991, President Bush told the U.S. soldiers deployed to the Gulf: “Americans today are confident of our country, confident of our future and most of all, confident about you. We promised you'd be given the means to fight. We promised not to look over your shoulder. We promised this would not be another Vietnam. And we kept that promise. The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.” (Tal 60)¹⁴¹ Two days later he told the Veterans Service Organization:

I made a comment right here at this podium the other day about shedding the divisions that incurred from the Vietnam War. And I want to repeat and say especially to the Vietnam veterans that are here [...] it's long overdue. It is long overdue that we kicked the Vietnam syndrome, because many veterans from that conflict came back and did not receive the proper acclaim that they deserve – that this nation was divided and we weren't as grateful as we should be. So somehow, when these troops come home [from the Gulf], I hope that message goes out to those that served this country in the Vietnam War that we appreciate their service as well. (Tal 60)¹⁴²

In this quote Bush again refers to the old image of the Vietnam veteran as victim, but with a twist: in the 1990s the image of Vietnam became more and more “the scar that binds,”¹⁴³ the rhetorical device to invoke and restore national unity. Clinical metaphors, like ‘wound,’ ‘syndrome,’ and the much-quoted ‘healing’ the veterans and the nation had to undergo, refer the war and its aftermath to the realm of illness and medicine. (Beattie 11-57, Tal 60-61) It served as the dominant rhetorical framework in which the consequences of the Vietnam War in America were represented. In line with this national cure was the opening of the Vietnam Women's Memorial on Veterans Day in 1993,¹⁴⁴ built with the explicit intention of

¹⁴¹ George Bush: “Radio Address to United States Armed Forces Stations in the Persian Gulf Region,” March 2, 1991, quoted from Tal 60.

¹⁴² George Bush: “Remarks to Veterans Service Organization,” March 4, 1991, quoted from Tal 60.

¹⁴³ The phrase is borrowed from the title of Keith Beattie's book *The Scar That Binds* on this subject.

¹⁴⁴ The plans for a separate memorial for women go back to an initiative by Diane Carlson Evans, a former Army nurse who served in Vietnam from 1968 through 1969. The addition of the ‘Three

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providing a place of healing for women veterans.¹⁴⁵ The war and the fate of the veterans had divided the country, but these divisions in American society were now mended, at least in the public discourse. “The end of this process was the true ‘cessation’ of the war.” (Beattie 154)

Fighting Men’ to a memorial that listed all dead American military personnel led to a desire for separate recognition of other groups that felt excluded by the one-sided view of the war that Hart’s statue conveys. In 1984 Evans launched the Vietnam Women’s Memorial Project, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., whose primary goal was to promote the healing of Vietnam women veterans by placing a separate women’s memorial near the Wall. In contrast to the Wall this memorial was supposed to honor not only the approximately 11,000 female Vietnam veterans but also the civilians and all women who served in the U.S. military during the Vietnam era. Its aim was to draw public attention to the women who went to war and to the psychological, physical and social problems they faced after their return to the States.

¹⁴⁵ The design by sculptor Glenna Goodacre consists of three women and one man, one women sitting on sandbags and supporting a wounded or even dying soldier on her lap, one looking at the sky, and one kneeling and picking up a helmet.

II.4. IN RETROSPECT – Narrative Representations of War¹⁴⁶

For the present overview, I have tried to select the best-known and most influential Vietnam war writings to depict the broad lines of development.¹⁴⁷ I have also included the discussion of well-known films and TV series into this chapter.

II.4.1. Literature

American war literature, Jeffrey Walsh claims, forms a distinct category of twentieth-century American literature “because the apprehension of war constitutes a distinctive and central element in the modern American literary consciousness.” Military situations and terrain have become familiar metaphors and images, and the jargon of soldiers has found entrance into everyday American language. (Walsh, *American War Literature* 1)¹⁴⁸ War literature is defined by its subject matter. It encompasses a wide variety of forms, genres, and presentational modes.

As Walsh argues, the “historical experience of Korea and Vietnam has generated a complex and radically new consciousness of war for America. In the immediate years following the Second World War the development of sophisticated nuclear technology and the continuing economic expansion of the United States seemed to presage an unbroken era of military supremacy; in reality America's involvement in

¹⁴⁶ The chapter title is borrowed from McNamara's memoir. For a brief overview of the literature and films of the Vietnam war see also the entry “Vietnam War” by Lucas Carpenter in Jason/Graves' *Encyclopedia of American War Literature*.

¹⁴⁷ A comprehensive discussion of the development of war literature in America is beyond the scope of this chapter. For a comprehensive, if sometimes historically mistaken, account of the Civil War see Edmund Wilson's still seminal study. For an account of the popular literature of the civil war see Fahs. The use of the Civil War in popular culture is discussed by Cullen. A historical overview of the First World War is provided by Quinn/Trout. The American novels of the First World War are discussed in Cooperman, in Kennedy's *Over Here*, and in Klein's essay collection. Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* is the seminal study concerning British war writers. For the importance and use of religious rhetoric in World War I writings see Bainton 210ff. and Ray Abrams. See Erenberg/Hirsch for a discussion of American culture and the Second World War. Holsinger/Schofield deal with the popular literature and culture of that time. For female poets and the war see Schweik. For a discussion of Second World War films see Beidler, *The Good War's Greatest Hits*, and Doherty.

¹⁴⁸ A discussion of the meaning of war for American identity provides Jill Lepore. The military novel is comprehensively discussed in Miller. Aichinger provides an overview of the American soldier in fiction from 1880 to the beginning of the Vietnam war.

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Asia proved otherwise.” (*American War Literature* 185) While the “forgotten war” in Korea produced no considerable literature (Fussell, *Bloody Game* 651)¹⁴⁹, since the beginning of the American involvement in Vietnam a large number of literary accounts - poetry and drama, fictional and non-fictional accounts of the war experience at home and abroad, written by veterans and civilians – have appeared.

Philip Beidler stresses the “impact of the American experience of Vietnam upon American cultural mythology at large” and emphasizes the wide variety of literary forms and genres:

In genre, it has ranged across letter, diary, journal, memoir, autobiography, short story, novel, poem, play, oral history, documentary, and journalistic report. Beyond, it has also frequently embraced and enlarged the forms and strategies of postmodernist new writing that now place themselves at the forefront of contemporary literary endeavor [...]. It has embraced strategies drawn from television in every dimension from social documentary to sitcom. [...] It has appropriated popular print from the critical essay to the western, the hard-boiled detective story, and the comic book. It has forged new and creative alliances [...]. (*Re-Writing America* 5)

As Walsh argues, the mass paperback market made a “cultural dynamism,” the interchange of styles and literary conventions possible. Also, it enabled not only a profitable marketing of the mass-produced ‘gung-ho’ novels, but also allowed for a distribution of more experimental fiction and poetry to a greater audience. (*American War Literature* 187)

¹⁴⁹ A few well-known novels, nevertheless, depict the war in Korea: James Mitchener’s novel *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* from 1953, which was also made into a major Hollywood film. Similarly, Richard Hooker’s novel *M*A*S*H*, which deals with the problems and antics of doctors and nurses in a front-line surgical hospital, gained wide acclaim. See Axelson for an overview of American novels of the Cold War period and the Korean War. In contrast to the lack of fictional literary responses, journalists produced a number of good reports on Korea, among them the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *War in Korea* by the female correspondent Marguerite Higgins. Higgins also reported from Vietnam and published *Our Vietnam Nightmare* in 1965. She contracted a fever and died from this illness in Vietnam, literally writing until her last day. For an extensive biography of Higgins see May. Recently, W.D. Ehrhart and Philip Jason have published a collection of poems and stories by Korean war veterans, called *Retrieving Bones* (1999).

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Poetry

Poetry has been produced both by veterans and non-veterans of the war. Pratt argues that the great number of poems is best able to represent the changing attitudes of American soldiers in Vietnam. ("Poetry and Vietnam" 541) The poetry includes songs sung by American servicemen as collected in Joseph Tusso's *Singing the Vietnam Blues* (1990), poems by soldiers published in magazines such as the satiric *Grunt* magazine or the official Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes* as well as poems by professional and established poets which were stylistically innovative, "immensely ambitious and moving works that rank with the best poetry of the age." (Pratt, "Poetry and Vietnam" 541) As far as content is concerned the poetry can be roughly divided into three groups: first, political protest poems which were mostly written by established poets who did not serve in the war, such as Robert Bly and Denise Levertov; second, series of poems, "verse novels,"¹⁵⁰ which are linked chronologically and depict an individual soldier's experience in Vietnam; and third, "the many short, personal poems which present single scenes, experiences, or events." (Pratt, "Poetry and Vietnam" 542)

Stephen Hidalgo argues that "[t]he value of poetry to recording the war experience is precisely in its close attention to the critical details of experience and in its attention to the order and perspective in which those details are perceived, either at the moment of experience or in the process of later memories." (463) Many writers, veterans and civilians, used poetry to express their anti-war stance. Robert Bly edited the first collection of anti-war poems together with David Ray, *A Poetry Reading Against the War* as early as 1966. It includes poems by well-known American poets like Bly, Robert Creeley, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Denise Levertov. Two more anti-war collections followed, both edited by Walter Lowenfels: *Where is Vietnam?* (1967) and *The Writing on the Wall* (1972). Only a few of these poems are set in Vietnam. The poets refer to politics and politicians, to the representation of the war on TV or in the newspapers, and to anti-war topics in general to make their standpoint clear. Pratt argues that these "anthologies and the numerous individual poems that were published served

¹⁵⁰ I borrow the term from Pratt to denote those narrative poems which present "a sequence of events or facts [...] whose disposition in time implies causal connection and point." Brogan 814.

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to define and sustain the general intellectual opposition to the war.“ (Pratt, “Poetry and Vietnam” 542) Also in 1966, Allen Ginsberg published his protest poem *Wichita Vortex Sutra*. More than most other Vietnam poets he uses the special euphemistic language of the war managers in his poem: *Wichita Vortex Sutra* is a diary-like collection of notes during a journey to Wichita. “Ginsberg manages, in effect, to call on Whitman's prophetic posture, to invoke the role and its still powerful symbolism, while exhibiting no conviction that anyone will heed his voice.“ (Nelson 37)

Poets also actively supported the anti-war movement: Robert Bly's poetry collection *The Light Around the Body* appeared in 1967, which won the National Book Award for Poetry. It contains some of the best-known poems against the war: “Hatred of Men with Black Hair,” “Counting Small-Boned Bodies,” “As the Asian War Begins,” and the satire “Johnson's Cabinet Watched by Ants.” Bly gave his National Book Award prize money to the “Resistance,” a draft resisters' organization. Three years later he published *The Teeth-Mother Naked at Last*, one of the most important anti-war poems. Also in 1967, Denise Levertov edited *Out of the War: 1968 Peace Calendar and Appointment Book*, a calendar sold to raise funds for war resisters. This calendar contains poems by Levertov and Gary Snider among others. Levertov continued to deal with the war till today: Her poetry collection *The Sorrow Dance* from 1967 contains a section of war poetry, “Life at War” (75-90). The poems deal with the moral questions raised by the war for the individual. In *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970), she published further war poems. In 1997, she has written a foreword for Kevin Bowen's and Bruce Weigl's collection *Writing Between the Lines: An Anthology on War and its Social Consequences*.

Three verse novels are of outstanding quality: Dick Shea's *Vietnam Simply* from 1967, McAvoy Layne's *How Audie Murphy Died in Vietnam* from 1972, and Leroy Quintana's *Interrogations* from 1990. Quintana is the only Hispanic veteran who has published a major poetry collection. Each of the verse novels deal with young men who undergo a development from innocence to experience and disillusion about the war and the American involvement in Vietnam. (Pratt, “Poetry and Vietnam” 543)

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Only very few poems by non-veterans deal with the experience of women in Vietnam. A remarkable exception is Adrienne Rich's poem "Dien Bien Phu" from 1974, which depicts the trauma of an American nurse caring for wounded in Vietnam. A number of poetry collections have appeared which anthologize works by veterans.¹⁵¹ These poems share thematic similarities with those written by American veterans of the First and Second World War, namely Alan Seeger, Joyce Kilmer, Randall Jarrell, or Richard Wilbur. But despite the similarities, there are also striking differences to earlier war poetry especially when it comes to the moral justification of the Vietnam War:

Earlier poets claimed a moral underpinning and legitimation for their involvement in battle: Alan Seeger and Joyce Kilmer drew upon the tropes of American crusaders, defending Western Culture; in the Second World War the fight against Nazism supplied a justification for death and wounding. [...] It seems that earlier American war poets had a series of reference points: they encountered no identity crisis in portraying the occupying GI as a valued ally and liberator; they clearly believed they were fighting on the side that was morally right. [In contrast,] it does seem clear that American poets who were combatants in Vietnam suffered an ethical disorientation related to the ideological confusion over the rights and wrongs of fighting the war. ("After Our War" 141-142)

Consequently, one of the primary topic of Vietnam poetry written by veterans is their personal development from innocence to experience. After their return, many veterans joined organizations of the anti-war movement and used their poems to substantiate their opposition to the Vietnam war. The soldier-poets presented the horrors of the Vietnam war and their war experiences with great detail and frankness. Their language "represents the actuality of the discourse that prevailed, filled with the soldiers' jargon and profanity, often requiring the use of a glossary because of the many references to historical events as well as specific people and place names." (Pratt, "Poetry and Vietnam" 543)

The poems explore a wide range of topics: They deal with the horrors of war, atrocities against innocent Vietnamese civilians, the death of young soldiers, and the general decline of values. The more the war progressed, the more it became obvious that America would not be able to win the war. Consequently, a large

¹⁵¹ For a critical account of the poets and the poetry see Gotera, *Radical Visions*. A general account of poetry in the Vietnam era is provided by Bibby, *Hearts and Minds*.

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number of poems mirror the emotions prevalent in many American participants: “the sense of loss of individuality, the feeling of guilt at having participated, the impossibility of anyone’s understanding the totality of the experience, the realization of having been betrayed by higher authority, and most often, the anger and bitterness at feeling like [...] ‘a slab of meat on the table’.” (Pratt, “Poetry and Vietnam” 543)

Important poets and their major books are D.C. Berry, *Saigon Cemetery* (1972), Michael Casey, *Obscenities* (1972), Bryan A. Floyd, *The Long War Dead* (1976), Perry Oldham, *Vinh Long* (1967), Horace Coleman, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (1977), Gerald McCarty, *War Story* (1977), D.F. Brown, *Returning Fire* (1984), Bill Shields, *Nam Poems* (1987), David Huddle, *Stopping by Home* (1988), Steve Mason, *Warrior for Peace* (1988), and Kevin Bowen, *Playing Basketball with the Vietcong* (1994). Many of the poems are anthologized in the various collections of Vietnam war poetry. The most important anthologies are Larry Rottman, Jan Barry and Basil T. Paquet’s *Winning Hearts and Mind: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans* from 1972, and *Demilitarized Zones*, edited by W.D. Ehrhart and Jan Barry in 1976. Barry also edited a collection of anti-war poems by veterans, called *Peace is Our Profession* (1981). Most poems deal with “the argot and esoteric jargon of soldiers” or reconstruct the combat experience. (Walsh, “After Our War” 143)

Philip Beidler names John Balaban, W.D. Ehrhart, Jusef Komunyakaa, and Bruce Weigl as the most significant soldier-poets of the war. “They are poets after our war who, even as they continue to speak its memory, now trace out in addition the patterns of its broader mythic configuring within our life and culture at large.” (*Re-Writing America* 146) Especially John Balaban’s collection *After Our War* (1974) “announces [...] the crucial role of the Vietnam poet as new cultural mythmaker, as centralizing agent in the large work of necessary cultural revision.”¹⁵² Balaban’s purpose is “to reconstitute an idea of something like poetic tradition and a newly

¹⁵² For a close reading of John Balaban’s poems from Ehrhart’s anthology *Carrying the Darkness* see Walsh, “After Our War.”

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possible context of value and meaning. At the same time, the enterprise is also the familiar one of the old high modern project in suggestive postmodern formulation, the text often as collage, collation, and even mass-media montage.” (Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 147-148) Balaban, who was a conscientious objector during the war and did civilian alternative service in 1966 and 1967, spent nearly a year recording Vietnamese folk poetry, translations of which he published in the collection *Ca Dao Vietnam* (1980).¹⁵³

W.D. Ehrhart and Bruce Weigl, as Lorrie Smith analyzes, refuse to refer to a past before the war or a poetry untouched by its consequences. Although the poetry is rooted in the war experience, it transcends the war experience “beyond a mere litany of atrocities to imagine the war’s continuing and palpable presence in American life [and to create] a range of responses which measure and connect the war’s psychic, cultural, political, and literary costs.” (“Sense-Making” 14) Ehrhart, one of the most prominent writers of Vietnam war literature, is the editor of two highly acclaimed poetry collections: *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired* (1984) as well as *Carrying the Darkness: American Indochina – The Poetry of the Vietnam War* (1985). Ehrhart, who wrote not only poetry but also autobiographical accounts of his time in Vietnam and the return and problems of reintegration into American society, played a crucial role in the development of a genuine literature of the Vietnam war. Philip Beidler praises him as

championing [...] a “Vietnam” literature itself when there was virtually no one, so it seemed, in the United States who possibly cared to read it or hear about it. Likewise, one must acknowledge his ongoing support of fellow Vietnam writers whose work often benefited by the war’s eventual reemergence as an object of popular fascination; of other poets who went on, for instance, to win the Lamont and Yale Prizes; and other novelists, memoirists, and cultural journalists who went on to win the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. In sum, amidst the remarkable achievements of writing after our war, Ehrhart continues to deserve recognition, perhaps more than any other, as the Vietnam author in his generation who in fact made the idea of such a thing possible in the first place. (*Re-Writing Vietnam* 309-310)

Bruce Weigl’s body of works can be regarded as charting “the enactment of a poetic career as an evolution of mythic consciousness distinctly tied to the American experience of Vietnam.” (Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 191) His collection of poems

¹⁵³ For a brief account of his life and literature see Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 147-148.

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from 1985, *The Monkey Wars*, investigate the new myths derived from Vietnam and the aftermath of the war. He dismantles, as Vincente Gotera states, the popular myth that the United States have regained their innocence as a nation by constantly confessing that the war in Vietnam was a mistake. ("Bringing Vietnam Home" 160) His second collection of Vietnam poems, *Song of Napalm* from 1988, continues to present the re-writing of the poet's experience as the re-writing of the poetic traditions and myths. (Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 200)

Yusef Komunyakaa, who served as a correspondent for the newspaper *Southern Cross* in Vietnam, is one of the few African-American authors of Vietnam war literature. His early poem collections, *Copacetic* (1984) and *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* (1986), deal mainly with black America and the African-American tradition in the United States. (Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 171) His collection of Vietnam poems, *Dien Cai Dau* from 1988, is one of the outstanding poetry collections by a Vietnam veteran.¹⁵⁴ Komunyakaa deals with topics such as the special experience of black soldiers, the relations of the black and white soldiers in Vietnam, the combat experience, the problems of homecoming, and a visit at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He emphasizes not only the ethnic differences but also the similarities between the black and white soldiers, for example in his poem "Tu-Do Street."

The anthologies of Vietnam poetry contain only few poems by female veterans. In 1991, Lynda Van Devanter and Joan A. Furley published a special collection of poems exclusively by female veterans. *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace: Writings of Women in the Vietnam War* explicitly aimed at bringing the "hidden writings" of women veterans to light, which "have been suppressed in the male-dominated sphere of fighting and writing war." (xxi-xxii) Barb Deardorf and others have collected war stories and poems by Army nurses under the title *Another Kind of War Story* (1993). Courtney Davis and Judy Shaeffer have edited a similar project, a special collection of nurses' writings, called *Between the Heartbeats: Poetry and*

¹⁵⁴ Philip Beidler explains the allusive title: "*Dien Cai Dau*. Di-en Kai Dow. Din Key Dow. Dinky Dow. Obviously in transliterated formal Vietnamese, suddenly the phrase has also become what it has been all along, the pidgin Dinky Dow, among the most familiar of all phrases known to those who served in Vietnam. It is the phrase for crazy. It was also, for a Vietnamese, the phrase for 'American soldier'." (*Re-Writing America* 177)

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Prose by Nurses (1995). Poems by female war participants can also be found in Franklin's collection *The Vietnam War in American Stories, Songs, and Poems* (1996), and Mahoney's collection of American and Vietnamese poetry *From Both Sides Now* (1998). Many poems by female veterans have also been published on the internet webbring *Women Poets of the Vietnam War*.¹⁵⁵

Drama and Musical

There are more Vietnam-era plays than plays which are actually set in Vietnam. Newman's *Bibliography* lists 41 plays and musicals. They include "agit-prop and guerrilla street theater, anti-war satire and allegory, plays about the plight of veterans and plays about the stateside families and friends." (DeRose 437). Anti-war theater, Nora Alter argues, extends the "abject horror" of the Vietnam war "beyond individual suffering and death, beyond national tragedy, though these are painfully and traumatically involved." (149)

Perhaps the best known plays of the Vietnam era is David Rabe's award-winning Vietnam trilogy *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1973), *Sticks and Bones* (1973), and *Streamers* (1985).¹⁵⁶ Rabe, who had served as a medic in Vietnam, intended his plays to "diagnose, as best I can, certain phenomena that went on in and around me." (Alter 132). *Pavlo Hummel* is set in Vietnam and the United States. The play begins with the death of Pavlo by a grenade thrown into a Saigon street café; in the ensuing scenes Pavlo is resurrected by the ghost of a black soldier, and shown his past life in the army. The first act depicts his basic training, the second his experiences as a medic in Vietnam. The play deals not only with basic training and Vietnam combat experience but also explores race relations between black and white soldiers as well as between the American soldiers and the Vietnamese.

¹⁵⁵ The internet has become a quite extensive source for poems and autobiographical pieces by male and female veterans. For poetry by female veterans see *Women Poets of the Vietnam War*. 19. May 2002 <>. For a discussion of the poetry by female veterans see also Gotera, "Reconciliation and Women's Poetry."

¹⁵⁶ See also Beidler, "American Dramatist: David Rabe" and N. Bradley Christie, "David Rabe's Theater of War and Remembering." For a survey of criticism on Rabe's work and a comprehensive bibliography see Kolin, "David Rabe," and *David Rabe* by the same author. See also Mohr and Houswitschka. A comprehensive overview of the Vietnam era theater is provided by Durham. For a more detailed description see Lesnick, Sainer, and Brecht.

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The second play of the trilogy, *Sticks and Bones*, is set entirely in America, in middle-class suburban normality. “[Rabe] proceeds to show how the corruption of Vietnam shatters that world totally when David, the elder son of Ozzie and Harriet (also of TV fame) returns blind from the war and is driven to suicide by his scarred past and scarring parents.” (Alter 137) The third play, *Streamers*, was produced twelve years after the end of the Vietnam war. It deals with the fear of being sent to Vietnam which results in violent outbreaks of the young men, in the course of which a black recruit kills two white draftees. Alter summarizes the plays’ final lesson as “War is hell, especially at home.” (Alter 141)

There are also a few other plays and musicals dealing with the soldier’s experience or the American counter-culture in the 60s, for example Terrence McNally’s *Bringing it All Back Home* (1967) John DiFusco’s *Tracers* (1986) or the musicals *Hair* (1969) and Megan Terry’s *Viet Rock* (1967).

Narrative Prose

The Vietnam war has generated a large body of narrative prose literature, both fiction and non-fiction.¹⁵⁷ Narrative prose works compose the largest part of the body of Vietnam war literature.¹⁵⁸ Critics state that in contrast to prior American wars, the literature of the Vietnam war consists of more autobiographical writings than fictional narratives. Kurt Dittmar argues

daß dieser literarische Rückzug in die Sphäre der rein persönlichen Erfahrung vor allem auch als Reaktion zu sehen ist auf das militärische, politische und moralische Chaos eines Krieges, der sich mit allen seinen Schattierungen in den Medien als omnipräsent fest etabliert hatte und sich eben deshalb allen traditionellen fiktionsästhetischen Wertsetzungen (gerade auch denen einer dialektischen Negativität im Sinne Adornos) weitgehend entzogen zu haben schien. (12)

¹⁵⁷ The following bibliographies provide a comprehensive overview over the primary literature of the war: Wittman, and Newman. A special collection of works by female authors is provided by Butler. A very good bibliography on the web is provided by Moise: <http://hubcap.clemson.edu/~eemoise/bibliography.html/6.11.2001>. Pratt’s “Bibliographic Commentary” gives an useful overview of the literature until the middle of the 80s.

¹⁵⁸ For an overview and case studies concerning American fictional literature about the Second World War and Vietnam see Hölbling, *Fiktionen*. Hölbling provides a impressive bibliography about the fictional and non-fictional literature of the Second World War, Korea, and Vietnam. Unfortunately, he makes some mistakes concerning the classification of the Vietnam literature, for example when he lists Ronald Glasser’s autobiography *365 Days* in the section ‘novels’.

Indeed, the public image of the war was primarily shaped by the ever-present, uncensored TV news. “Im Grunde hatten [...] die Medien bald schon in allen nur denkbaren Varianten sowohl die Glorifizierung als auch seine politische und moralische Diskreditierung weitgehend absolviert.” (8) According to Dittmar, this contributed primarily to the preeminence of autobiographical literature written by Vietnam veterans. (8)

Nevertheless, it is difficult to prove the preeminence of autobiographical writings on the numbers of writings available. Newman’s *Annotated Bibliography of Imaginative Works about Americans Fighting in Vietnam* from 1996, the most recent and comprehensive bibliography about the fictional literature of the Vietnam war, lists 666 entries under “Novels”, and another 311 under “Short Stories.” (3-435) A search in the online catalog of the Library of Congress results in 497 entries under the heading “fiction” and thus deviates from Newman’s listings, possibly due to different criteria for the categorization of literature. In contrast to the fictional literature, there are no numbers readily available for non-fictional literature. Again, the catalogue of the Library of Congress provides a starting point: It lists under the subject heading “Personal Narratives – American” 548 entries. These admittedly vague results can not finally answer the question whether more autobiographies or more novels have been published. But it seems that the numbers are similar. Perhaps the fact that non-fictional writings appear to be in the majority can be explained as a result of the assignment of an authoritative speaking position to the veterans. (Beattie 8)

*Fiction*¹⁵⁹

The first novels on Vietnam appeared before the war actually began in 1965: Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American* (1955) and William Lederer and Eugene Burdick’s *The Ugly American* (1958) both criticized the growing American involvement in Southeast Asia. Greene, who was a reporter in Saigon in the early 1950s, exposes the naiveté and self-righteousness of the Americans who go on to ruin the lives of the people and even to kill them despite the Americans’ the best intentions. Lederer and Burdick’s *Ugly American*, made into a movie starring

¹⁵⁹ For an overview of American war fiction from the Civil War to Vietnam see Limon.

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Marlon Brando, is set in a fictional Southeast Asian country. It depicts the failures of American advisors and ambassadors who are ill-equipped to carry out American policy. Olson concludes that, while Greene criticizes the Americans for being too idealistic, it could be argued that Lederer and Burdick criticize the Americans in contrast for not being idealistic enough. (*Vietnam* 382-383)

A number of books, especially those written in the early phase of the war,

tend to privilege the combat experience and are less explicitly concerned with using that experience to derive lessons, draw conclusions, or relate the war in any meaningful way to the larger cultural forces that produced them [...], they tend to be self-aggrandizing, overtly racist and sexist, and exploitive of the war. Yet works of this type bear mentioning because there are so many of them; they are easy to spot on bookstore shelves since most are published by popular mass-market presses [...]. (Lawson 369)

The best-known and commercially most successful specimen of this kind of novels is Robin Moore's *The Green Berets*.¹⁶⁰ The film of the same name, starring John Wayne, is based on Moore's novel. *The Green Berets* with the book's "animated cartoon heroes" (Hölbling, "Discourse of Contradiction" 128) draw heavily on the popular mythology derived from the Second World War: "Since American wars are never undertaken for imperialist gain (myth one), American soldiers always fight in a virtuous cause (myth two) for a just and goalless peace (myth three)." (126) The Special Forces troops in Vietnam are depicted as the rescuers of South Vietnam from its own incompetent government. The South Vietnamese who are supposed to fight alongside the Americans act cowardly in combat or even desert in battle. The Vietcong and North Vietnamese are evil murderers and torturers. The book also celebrates American technology, democracy, and capitalism. (Olson, *Vietnam* 384-385) The book found a number of similar followers, for example Scott Stone's *The Coasts of War* (1966), Peter Derring's *The Pride of the Green Berets* (1966), which "reads like an enlistment brochure for the Special Forces" (Olson, *Vietnam* 385), Brian Garfield's *The Last Bridge* (1966), Richard Newhafer's *No More Bugles in the Sky* (1966) or Gene Moores *The Killing at Ngo Tho* (1967). All books emphasize the heroism of the American fighting men, more often than not Special Forces troops. Many of the topics from Moore's *Green Berets* and his descendants

¹⁶⁰ For a brief comment on the book see Beidler, *American Literature* 34-42; much more critical Hölbling, *Fiktionen* 131-137.

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are revived in Michael Lanning's trilogy *The Only War We Had* (1987), *Vietnam 1969-1970*, (1988) and *Inside the LRRPS* (1988) as well as in Charles Henderson's *Marine Sniper: 93 Confirmed Kills* (1986).

After 1967 and the Tet offensive¹⁶¹, Olson states, the fiction about the Vietnam war could not have been more different from the above mentioned novels. "During the rest of the war years, most of the fiction portrayed Indochina as an alien place for Americans, a region of the world where they ought not be involved." (*Vietnam* 385) One of the outstanding works of this period is David Halberstam's *One Very Hot Day* from 1967. Halberstam's protagonist Captain Beaupre, a veteran from the previous wars, has no illusions, his only goal is to survive. His character is contrasted with the young, idealistic Lieutenant Anderson, who is determined to win the war against communism. When Anderson is killed in a firefight, Beaupre can not find a meaning in his or any American's death in Vietnam. "As far as Beaupre is concerned, Anderson had died for nothing on a hot day in nowhere." (Olson, *Vietnam* 385)

Also after the Tet offensive, anti-war novels began to appear. Following the lead of John Sack's novel *M* (1967), they depicted the senselessness of the war, the irrationality of the war, the violence and the effect the war had on the fighting men, as, for example, Martin Russ' *Happy Hunting Ground* (1968) and Charles Coe's *Young Man in Vietnam* (1968). James Crumley's novel *One to Count Cadence* (1969) deals with the violence inherent in military life and the futility of the Vietnam war. Similarly, William Hugget's *Body Count* (1973) exposes the failures of American policy in Vietnam on the example of the battle for Khe Sanh. Daniel Ford's *Incident at Muc Wa* (1967) and William Pelfry's *The Big V* (1972) use black comedy to depict the absurdities of the war and the incompetence of the officers who fight for no other reason than their own promotion. (Olson, *Vietnam* 387) William Eastlake's *The Bamboo Bed* from 1969 uses surrealistic images – "peace-loving hippie flower children wandering aimlessly through the Indochinese jungles; helicopter pilots having sex with medevac nurses while airborne; American rangers topped with Roman helmets and accompanied by drummer boys airlifted into

¹⁶¹ See chapter II.1. of this study.

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French-Vietnamese villas” (Olson, *Vietnam* 387-388) – to underline the essential absurdity of the war, which, as his images, make no sense at all for the soldiers who fight the war.

One of the best-known antiwar novels is Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967).¹⁶² The novel is set in the United States and Alaska; Vietnam is only mentioned in the last sentence. Mailer narrates the story of a hunting party in Alaska which uses the latest hunting technology to slaughter the animals. “The carnage is extraordinary and, for Norman Mailer, symbolic of what American military technology was doing to the life and habitat of Southeast Asia.” (Olson, *Vietnam* 387) As Hölbling argues, Mailer attempted to depict the engagement in Vietnam through a fictional psychoanalysis of the collective subconscious of America. (*Fiktionen* 193) After the end of the war in 1973, fiction about the conflict was scarce. Only a few novels – Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* (1973), Stephen Smith's *American Boys* (1975), or James Kirkwood's *Some Kind of Hero* (1975) – appeared due to the lack of interest of the public in Vietnam and the reluctance of the publishers to deal with the topic. (Olson, *Vietnam* 388) At the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s, however, the public was ready to deal with the war experiences again. This may be interpreted in connection with the development of the public discourse about the war in the United States. At the beginning of the eighties, the public interest in the war and the veterans' experiences, which was non-existent in the years immediately following the war, grew. The emphasis on the POW/MIA issue and the re-interpretation of the Vietnam veteran as the patriotic hero who had given his all to the noble cause as well as public recognition of the veterans through the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982 had brought the veteran and his experiences to the center of the discussion about the Vietnam war. According to Newman's *Bibliography*, nearly half of the novels appeared between 1984 and 1991.¹⁶³ The public interest in the topic of the Vietnam war can explain the

¹⁶² For an overview of Mailer's biography and works see Lennon/Lennon.

¹⁶³ The following distribution of novels per annum can be gleaned from Newman's *Bibliography* (3-435): 1964: 1 novel, 1965: 4 novels, 1966: 13, 1967: 25, 1968: 21, 1969: 22, 1970: 6, 1971: 17, 1972: 14, 1973: 12, 1974: 13, 1975: 10, 1976: 10, 1977: 8, 1978: 12, 1979: 13, 1980: 15, 1981: 13, 1982: 20, 1983: 24, 1984: 39, 1985: 31, 1986: 42, 1987: 46, 1988: 44, 1989: 51, 1990: 43, 1991: 30, 1992: 18, 1993: 1, 1994: 9, 1995: 4.

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increasing appearance of Vietnam war novels in the 80s. In 1991, after the success in the Gulf War, the interest in the Vietnam war decreased as well as the numbers of novels published about the war.

“The finest novel of the Vietnam War,” according to Olson, is Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* (1978). O’Brien does not try to recreate the war experiences and the Vietnamese environment realistically. Instead, the book “is surrealistic, highly symbolic, even though it retains the violence, capriciousness, and absurdity of the war.” (*Vietnam* 391) Cacciato, an ordinary American infantry soldier, suddenly decides to leave the war and walk to Paris, France. His squad, of which the third-person narrator Paul Berlin is a member, is assigned to follow the deserter and bring him back. The soldiers cross the border to Cambodia and walk through Asia and Asia Minor in pursuit of Cacciato. The novel depicts the inner and outer journey of Paul Berlin and blends the different time levels of present, past and future to reflect the levels of consciousness of the protagonists.¹⁶⁴ Philip Beidler calls the book “a postmodernist classic of magical realism.” (*Re-Writing America* 11)¹⁶⁵ He concludes that “in *Going After Cacciato* we are confronted with the prospect of a new imaginative fiction of the American experience of Vietnam that would propose ultimately to reify itself *precisely through imagination* into nothing less than redemptory cultural fact.” (*Re-Writing America* 20)

Another widely acclaimed novel is John Del Vecchio’s *The 13th Valley* from 1982.¹⁶⁶ Hölbling acknowledges the book as different from other books because the novel combines the realistic depiction of warfare and a critical view of American society with praise of the valiant American fighting men. Nevertheless, the

¹⁶⁴ Many scholars have discussed this extraordinary novel. For thorough analyses of the novel see esp. Hölbling, *Fiktionen* 260-290, Beidler, *American Literature* 172-179, Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 20-24, Herzog 79-104, Kaplan 82-126, Myers 76-89.

¹⁶⁵ Despite this praise O’Brien has always distanced himself and his book from the label “magical realism.” He stated that “I see myself as a realist in the strictest sense. That is to say, our daydreams are real; our fantasies are real. They aren’t constructed as otherwise in any of my books.” (Herzog 80)

¹⁶⁶ In only a few weeks, the novel saw four editions and was sold more than 50,000 times. Reviews, for example in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Playboy*, or *Newsweek* were also very positive. See Hölbling, *Fiktionen* 122.

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descriptions of war resemble the Second World War as depicted in Mailer's *The Naked and The Dead* rather than sufficiently representing the specific experience of warfare in Vietnam. (Hölbling, *Fiktionen* 113-115)

Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green* (1983) combines, as Olson argues, "most of the negative themes emerging from earlier novels." (*Vietnam* 392) The book follows a young soldier's the tour of duty. He joins the war with dreams of glory and patriotism, which he eventually loses through his experiences. To be able to deal with his feelings of guilt at the mutilation and destruction of Vietnamese civilians he becomes an heavy heroin addict. Thus, the book mirrors the reality of thousands of American soldiers in Vietnam who took refuge from reality in the consumption of narcotics, especially in the last phase of the war.¹⁶⁷

Especially in the second half of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, the POW-novel thrived. The new "'comic book' literature'" brought with it a "Ramboization" of the war. (Olson, *Vietnam* 393) The main theme of these novels, like J.C. Pollock's *Mission M.I.A* (1982), Brian Freemantle's *The Vietnam Legacy* (1984) or Allen Leib's *Valley of the Shadow* (1992) depict the successful rescue of American POW's from North Vietnamese prisoner camps by a heroic American officer. After the end of the Gulf War in 1991, novels appeared which exploited the American stab-in-the-back-legend: the war in Vietnam was lost because the politicians placed too many restrictions on the fighting men. One example is Joe Weber's *Rules of Engagement* (1992).¹⁶⁸

Novels like O'Brien's award-winning collection of short stories *The Things They Carried* (1991), George Davis' *Coming Home* (1975), Charles Durden's *No Bugles, No Drums* (1977), Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters* (1977) Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985), and James Webb's *Fields of Fire* (1978) deal with the Vietnam war and its aftermath from different perspectives. There are also a few novels which depict the experience of soldiers in the rear echelons, for example David Willson's *REMF Diary* (1988).

¹⁶⁷ See Dubberly as well as chapter II.2.1. of the present study.

¹⁶⁸ For an overview see Beidler, "Bad Business."

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In contrast to only five autobiographical accounts by nurses, eleven nurse novels appeared between 1966 and 1995, five of them under the stereotypical title *Vietnam Nurse*: Della Field's *Vietnam Nurse* (1966), Suzanne Roberts' *Vietnam Nurse* (1966), Ellen Elliott's *Vietnam Nurse* (1969), Nell M. Dean's *Nurse in Vietnam* (1969), Elizabeth Sims More's *Bend With the Wind* (1980), Patricia L. Walsh's *Forever Sad the Hearts* (1982), Evelyn Hawkins' *Vietnam Nurse* (1984), Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's *The Healer's War* (1988), Zack Emerson's *Echo Company No. 3: 'Tis the Season* (1991), Elise Title's *Till the End of Time* (1991), and Ellen Emerson White's *The Road Home* (1995). Most of them are more concerned with the romantic involvement of the young and beautiful heroine with the handsome, strong and very manly officer than with the details of war nursing. Most of these romances are of questionable literary quality. Nevertheless, there are some outstanding novels: Patricia L. Walsh's *Forever Sad the Hearts* (1982) as well as Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's *The Healer's War* (1988) deal realistically with the experiences of combat nurses, probably because both authors served as nurses in Vietnam. A few books depict the experiences of other female war participants: Danielle Steele's *Message from Nam* (1990) is concerned with the romantic relationships of a young female reporter. "It is loaded with clichés" Olson comments and concludes: "Some live and some die, but love survives." (*Vietnam* 393) Terry Farish's book *Flower Shadows* describes the experiences of female Red Cross volunteers, and Kathryn Jensen's *Sing to Me, Saigon* (1994) has a female Air Force Radio Performer as its protagonist. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon* (1989) is exceptional concerning the literary quality and the choice of the point of view. She narrates many chapters from the perspective of a Vietnamese peasant girl who becomes a prostitute after her sole source of income, her buffalo, had been shot.

Non-Fiction

The non-fictional literature of the Vietnam war encompasses sub-genres like autobiographies, letters, diaries, oral histories, and memoirs as well as journalistic writings. "But the life-writings of the Vietnam era differ greatly in style, tone, and purpose from that of America's previous foreign armed conflicts, particularly World War I and World War II." (Chauhan 915) The reasons for these differences derive from the nature of the Vietnam war. Fussell calls the war "post-modern" in

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the sense that it developed beyond the “‘modern’ to something even more skeptical, problematic, and even nihilistic [...]” (*Bloody Game* 656) He argues that especially due to the experience of the body count as sole measure for success and other forms of “sadistic lunacy” particular to the war, the soldiers “developed the particular sardonic-joky style, half ironic, totally subversive, which is the hallmark of Vietnam War rhetoric.” (*Bloody Game* 655)¹⁶⁹

*Oral History Collections*¹⁷⁰

The oral history collections of the Vietnam war deal mostly with the experiences of minority groups and of the ordinary soldiers. Wallace Terry’s compilation *Bloods* (1984) presents the war experiences of African-American soldiers. The collection reflects the changes in attitude and outlook of the black soldiers who questioned more and more their own role in the war as cannon fodder – due to the extraordinary high numbers of African-American casualties – and wondered why they were fighting for the rights of other people when they did not have the same rights as the white people in the United States. Especially after the assassination of Martin Luther King, many expressed their feeling that the real war was going on in America. Also, the number of incidents of racial violence grew. Similar to the white soldiers, for many survival became the only goal worth fighting for in Vietnam. Larry Lee’s collection *American Eagle* (1977) and Tom Holm’s *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls* (1996) as well as Charles Trujillo’s *Soldadas* (1989) tell similar stories from the American Indian and Hispanic point of view.

The stories of mostly white soldiers are presented in Al Santoli’s, *Everything We Had* (1981) and *To Bear Any Burden* (1985), in Mark Baker’s *Nam* (1982) or Michael Norman’s *These Good Men* (1991). Some of them, as Baker’s collection, are heavily edited. They arrange the different voices into a chronological narration

¹⁶⁹ Fussell quotes as examples the visiting cards a gunship helicopter commander dropped on his victims which read: “Congratulations. You have been killed through the courtesy of the 361st” and another helicopter company who promised to provide “Death and Destruction 24 Hours a Day.” (*Bloody Game* 655)

¹⁷⁰ There are a few collections of oral histories on the internet: The Veteran’s History Project at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., collects the accounts of American veterans from the First World War to the Persian Gulf. The Oral History Project at Texas Tech University collects stories by American, Vietnamese, and Allied military and civilian personnel. **The Vietnam Veteran’s Oral History and Folksong Collection** at Buffalo State University is also concerned with the preservation of Vietnam veterans’ stories and folksongs of the American armed forces.

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of gradual disillusionment, as it is known from many autobiographies. Others contain the stories of several men without visible editing, for example Al Santoli's two collections. As Olson states, they

all tend to reiterate similar themes – how innocence gave way to skepticism, how commitment disintegrated into survivalism, how hope turned into cynicism, and how relief at coming home became bitterness. There is also a premier universal theme to all of the first-person recollections: how Vietnam had a powerful bonding effect on men and women who found themselves supporting themselves under such extraordinarily difficult conditions. (*Vietnam* 29)

Donald Kirk's collection *Tell it to the Dead* (1975) especially focusses on the change in attitude in the troops in the late 60s and early 70s when they saw the war increasingly as senseless, drug abuse and fragging incidents increased, and disobedience of the soldiers toward their superior officers grew. Harry Maurer's *Strange Ground* (1988) offers oral histories from a wide range of military and civilian personnel: soldiers, officers, prisoners of war, antiwar activists, civilians and diplomats.

A few oral history collections focus on special topics: Stephen Rowan's collections of stories by American prisoners of war, *They Wouldn't Let Us Die* (1975) deals with the life in the prisoner camps and the survival strategies of the prisoners. Eric Hammel's collections *Khe Sanh: Siege in the Clouds* (1989) and *The Assault on Khe Sanh* (1990) tell in graphic detail about the horrible months-long battle for Khe Sanh and the frustration of the Marines when the city was abandoned. There are also collections which deal especially with the last days of the war: Stephen Hosmer's *The Fall of South Vietnam* (1978) and Larry Engelman's *Tears Before the Rain* (1990) depict "the unbelievable chaos of the last days of the war and the overwhelming sense of betrayal so many South Vietnamese felt at the time." (Olson, *Vietnam*, 37) The perspective of the South Vietnamese is represented in Luce and Sommer's collection which was created during the war *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices*. (1969). The stories of conscientious objectors who served in the military during the Vietnam war are collected in Gerald Giglio's *Days of Decision* (1989). There is also a collection by J.T. Hansen, Susan Owen, and Michael Madden, called *Parallels* (1992), which

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compares the experiences of American soldiers in Vietnam and Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan and discovers astonishing parallels between both wars and the soldiers' experiences and attitudes.

A small number of oral history collections deal with the experiences of women, namely Keith Walker's *A Piece of My Heart* (1985), Kathryn Marshall's *In the Combat Zone* (1987), and Ron Steinman's *Women in Vietnam* (2000). Most stories are told by former nurses. Nevertheless, the collections include also stories by American women in Vietnam working in the Special Services, with the American Red Cross, as entertainer for the troops, as missionaries, flight attendants, or Armed Forces Radio announcer (Walker), as journalists or as instructors (Marshall), as secretaries, clerk typists, as intelligence personnel or in communications, logistics and engineering with the Women's Army Corps (Steinman). These women returned to a similar uncaring environment and dealt with similar problems stemming from their war experiences. Many also talk about the healing function of the official recognition of the services of women in Vietnam.

Letter Collections

A few collections of letters, written by soldiers and their families, have appeared to date. Bernard Edelman's *Dear America* (1985), which was also made into a film in 1987, represents a wide range of views on the war. It includes letters by male and female soldiers, enlisted men and officers. *Dear America* tries to reconstruct the road from innocence to experience and disillusion. The letters reflect the division in the United States about the moral and political justification of the war. Many also talk about the changes the writers observe in themselves. Most letters, as Olson concludes, "where written by young men who did not want to go there and wanted nothing more than to get out alive." (*Vietnam* 34) A similar collection of letters is provided in Bracksone, Stone, and Wilson's *Front Lines* (1975). There is also a collection of letters and mementos left behind at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial which reflect the emotions of the relatives and friends of Vietnam soldiers, namely Laura Palmer's *Shrapnel in the Heart* from 1988.

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Autobiographies

The autobiographical accounts of veterans dominate the non-fictional literature of the Vietnam war.¹⁷¹ Bates emphasizes the great variety of people who have written about their experiences:

The body of Vietnam narratives published to date embraces not only the combatants' experience but also that of American doctors, nurses, missionaries, journalists, USO volunteers, entertainers, and civilian officials and workers who spent time in country. It includes stories told by Vietnamese men and women on both sides of the conflict, also by soldiers and civilians from France, England, Australia, New Zealand, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and several other countries. If the war zone is expanded beyond Vietnam, the stories include those told by all whose lives were touched or whose imaginations were quickened by the war. (219)

Many of the books saw only one edition and disappeared, others, like Tim O'Brien's autobiography *If I Die in a Combat Zone* or Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* have become classics of war literature. In contrast to authors like O'Brien, Caputo, W.D. Ehrhart or Tobias Wolff, who are professional writers and who have published several books, most autobiographers, as Hölbling states,

have little or no experience as writers, and only a few have written more than one account of the events that drastically changed them and often enough came (too) close to destroying their lives. For many of them, writing is not only a desperate attempt at sharing their experience with an audience of fellow citizens who, in their majority are (and often would prefer to remain) unaware of the indelible scars this war has left on those who actually fought it. For Vietnam veterans, writing is also a way of spelling out - quite literally - their rage and disillusionment and of making use of the auto-therapeutic power of writing. ("Discourse of Contradiction" 137)

Many autobiographies tell of the development of a young, idealistic, patriotic man who goes to Vietnam lured by Second World War movies, heroic images of John Wayne, and Kennedy's pledge "to bear any burden." In Vietnam, he soon loses his patriotic and heroic notions about war and becomes disillusioned and bitter. Jeffrey Walsh argues that a certain plot is central to American war literature which is also detectable in many of the autobiographical accounts of Vietnam veterans:

[...] the hero, a good and young American, volunteers or is drafted to war, he enters the combat zone and mixes with men from different social classes from himself and of contrasting ethnic backgrounds. In uniform he learns what it is like to be born to drill and die; thus his experience parallels that of the hero of a *Bildungsroman*: caught in crossfire he learns to combat his loneliness and to

¹⁷¹ See Dittmar, "Literatur und mediale Berichterstattung" 12.

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submerge himself in the resistance subculture of his fellow soldiers. He is likely to cultivate a rebellious kind of behaviour, conducting himself less frequently in a solipsistic manner and sharing social practices, argot and rituals of style which are creatively counteractive to the rigidities of militarism. As well as this flexing of a countercultural awareness, the soldier-hero may also participate in a generational consciousness. (5)

Examples for this kind of narratives are Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977). Both men joined the military out of idealistic and patriotic reasons but soon became disillusioned and disgusted with the war. Kovic is paralyzed from the waist down due to a wound he received in Vietnam. His book focusses especially on his experiences after his injury, his time in the hospital, rehabilitation and involvement in the anti-war movement. A similar process of gradual disillusionment is depicted in David Regan's *Mourning Glory* (1981), in W.D. Ehrhart's account *Vietnam-Perkasie* (1983)¹⁷², and in the collective autobiographies of Charles Anderson, *The Grunts* (1976) and Peter Goldman, *Charlie Company* (1983). Matthew Brennan served several tours in Vietnam, due to a combination of support for the war and an inability to adjust to a society that had changed during his absence. In *Brennan's War* (1985) he describes the change in attitude of the soldiers and the deterioration of morale among the troops over the years.

A few autobiographies have been written by officers. They express a similar frustration and disillusioning with the conduct of the war as the enlisted men. John Trotti's *Phantom over Vietnam* (1981) Jack Broughton's *Thud Ridge* (1969) deal with the air war over North Vietnam. Trotti expressed his doubts about the effectivity of the air war, while Broughton talks about his frustrations at the restrictions imposed on the American air war. James McDonough's account *Platoon Leader* recounts how his initial enthusiasm for the war faded away as he lost more and more members of his platoon to booby traps.

In contrast to the initially enthusiastic war participants, Tim O'Brien's autobiography, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973) and John Ketwig's *...And a Hard Rain Fell* (1985) tell of the reluctant participation in the war which both authors

¹⁷² Ehrhart has published three more autobiographical accounts: *Passing Time*; *Going Back: An Ex-Marine Returns to Vietnam*, and *Busted: A Vietnam Veteran in Nixon's America*.

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deemed wrong and unjust. Both authors thought about fleeing to Canada, but finally decided to join the war. Nevertheless, “neither ever found a reason to support the war.” (Olson, *Vietnam* 32) Robert Mason’s *Chickenhawk* (1983) recounts the experiences of a helicopter pilot in the first years of the war. Mason did not serve for idealistic reasons but because he owed the Army three years of service for his education as a helicopter pilot. He saw the war and the military objectives as questionable from the start and grew more and more skeptical during his tour because the South Vietnamese did not support the United States.¹⁷³

A small number of autobiographies deal with the experience of American prisoners of war, for example Jeremiah Denton’s *When Hell Was in Session* (1976) or James Bond and Sybil Stockdale’s account *In Love and War* (1984).¹⁷⁴ Both books were also made into films. Stockdale, a U.S. Navy Commander, was held prisoner by the North Vietnamese for eight years while his wife organized and founded an organization of POW wives in the States. As Olson argues, the themes of these accounts are similar, due to the similar experiences of the POWs: “periodic interrogations and occasional torture sessions, long periods of little or no contact with other colleagues, constant tension about future treatment, an almost complete lack of information about the course of the war or the negotiations, and concern about just how long their captivity would last.” (*Vietnam* 35-36) Some narratives also deal with the problems of returning to a family which has become strange after a long absence.¹⁷⁵

There are five autobiographies of female soldiers published to date: Lynda Van Devanter’s *Home Before Morning* (1983), Lynn Hampton’s *The Fighting Strength* (1990), Winnie Smith’s *American Daughter Gone to War* (1992), Sharon Grant Wildwind’s *Dreams that Blister Sleep* (1999), and Mary Powell’s *A World of Hurt*

¹⁷³ Mason wrote a sequel to his autobiography, *Chickenhawk Back in the World*, where he tells about his difficulties after coming home. He was suffering from the symptoms of PTSD, had to give up his job as a flight instructor due to recurring flashbacks and was finally caught smuggling narcotics into the U.S. In jail and through the unwavering support of his wife, he began to come to terms with his war experiences and problems.

¹⁷⁴ See Doyle for an extensive interpretation of the American POW narrative.

¹⁷⁵ There is also an autobiographical account of a German civilian nurse, Monika Schwinn’s *Eine Handvoll Menschlichkeit*. She and four other civilians were held prisoner by the Vietcong for four years. Schwinn and one of her colleagues were the only ones to survive. The book was translated into English in 1976 and published under the title *We Came to Help*.

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(2000). All women served as nurses in Vietnam. Except for Mary Powell's account which contains not only her own but also the stories of other medical personnel, they have structural and contentual similarities: The four women narrate their life-stories chronologically, beginning with their childhood, youth, and upbringing, proceeding through their tour of duty in Vietnam, and describing their ensuing problems in reintegrating themselves into American society again. Their war experiences are similar: They

were just as frustrating as those of the men there, except they also had to deal with the problems of sexism from male physicians, the psychological stress of dealing every day with severely wounded and dying men, and the overwhelming sense of seeing so much pain and suffering wasted in such an ignoble cause. They also had to deal with the issue of how technology permitted human beings to bring so much death and slaughter to each other. (Olson, *Vietnam* 33)

Van Devanter, Hampton and Smith also tell about the time after the war, the difficult process of coming to terms with the war experiences and to be acknowledged as a female Vietnam veteran, both by family and friends as well as by the American public.

Not only female nurses, but also a few doctors have written about their experiences in Vietnam: Ronald Glasser, *365 Days* (1971), John Parrish, *12, 20 and 5: A Doctor's Year in Vietnam* (1972), and James Kelsh, *Triage* (1977). These narratives resemble the autobiographies of nurses more than those of male combat soldiers concerning the war experiences.

A few autobiographies deal with the return of veterans to Vietnam. W.D. Ehrhart's *Going Back* (1987) and Mark Thompson's *Returning to Despair* (1991) describe the return as an attempt to finally overcome the war trauma. The veterans' return to the United States was abrupt and disillusioning, and they had not been able to come to terms with the war experience. Thus, some decided to return to the place that had become so decisive for their whole lives "to understand its impact and perhaps finally to put the war behind them." (Olson, *Vietnam* 38) The account of the CBS reporter Harry Reasoner, *Flashbacks* (1990), contains not only his personal impressions of Vietnam in the 80s, but also an interview with former North Vietnamese minister of defense Vo Nguyen Giap.

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There are also a few autobiographies by Vietnamese which are available in English. The best known account is Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1990). It describes the experiences of a young South Vietnamese peasant woman who, after having been tortured and raped by the Vietcong, marries an American soldier and emigrates to the States. The book was also made into a major motion picture by Oliver Stone in 1993.

*Memoirs*¹⁷⁶

There are several memoirs by military or political leaders. The most important and widely debated are General William Westmoreland's *A Soldier Reports* and Robert McNamara's *In Retrospect*. Westmoreland, the head of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, wrote his account in 1976. Although he admits failures by the military command, Westmoreland blames chiefly the strong control of the war and the restrictions imposed on the military by the politicians in Washington for the defeat. He foregrounds the knowledge of the war managers before that of the field soldier "whose perspective is narrow." (554) He concludes that the military and the servicemen are by no means to be held responsible for the outcome of the war; rather, misguided peace activist aided by a deluded press and an erring government have to take the blame for the first lost war in American history.

McNamara's book caused a sensation when it appeared in 1995, because the former Secretary of Defense was the first politician to admit that the decisions taken by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations "were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why." (xx) He discovers eleven main failures which led to the defeat in Vietnam, among them the misjudging of the enemy's intentions and dedication as well as of the political forces within South Vietnam, the ignorance of Vietnamese culture and politics, the failure to ensure public support for the war after the conflict had begun, and organizational weaknesses in the executive

¹⁷⁶ The term "memoir" is defined as follows: "Denkwürdigkeiten, Lebenserinnerungen, Darstellungen selbsterlebter historischer Tatsachen verbunden mit einer Rechtfertigung des eigenen Verhaltens; bei zusammenhängendem Lebensbild mit zeitlicher Abfolge mit fließenden Grenzen zur Autobiographie, doch meist stärker auf die Umweltgeschehnisse und -zustände ausgerichtet, an denen der Verfasser handelnd oder leidend teilhat, auch sorgloser, detailfreudiger plaudernd und unverbindlicher als diese, bes. durch die subjektive Färbung, die in Auswahl und Ausdeutung des Erzählten oft tendenzöse Zwecke verfolgt und nicht zuletzt unwillkürlich ein uneingestandenes Wunschbild des Vergangenen, wie es hätte sein sollen, wiedergibt." (Wilpert 503)

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branches of the American government. (321-323) Both memoirs, different as they are, provide a valuable insight in the processes of military and political decision-making.

Journalistic Accounts

As Olson states, among the best accounts of the Vietnam war are those written by journalists. (*Vietnam* 39) David Halberstam, correspondent for *The New York Times* in Vietnam, won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting. His book from 1964, *The Making of a Quagmire*, already foresaw that the American involvement in Vietnam would prove a failure as long as it was tied to the existing South Vietnamese government. (Olson, *Vietnam* 40) Neil Sheehan, who worked for the United Press International in Vietnam, published in 1988 his best-selling book *A Bright and Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. This book provides a biography of Vann, an Army officer who served several years in Vietnam, and a history of the American involvement in Southeast Asia. It is written from the first-hand perspective of Sheehan and combines factual history with personal impressions and opinions.

The probably best-known journalistic account is Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977).¹⁷⁷ Myers calls it "the war's most distinctive and eloquent voice, its most abundant and demanding compensatory history." (169) It belongs to the sub-genre of New Journalism.¹⁷⁸ As the title *Dispatches* already suggests, the book contains loosely connected bits and pieces of his Vietnam war experience. Herr is, Myers suggests,

the historian who follows to its textual limits the proposition that the faithful recording of the war is synonymous with the imaginative creating of it in a language sufficiently elastic, poetic, and associative to overcome the reconciled history already receding into public memory. More than any other chronicler of the war, Herr attempts to discover within the materials of individual consciousness a historical lexicon and syntax with enough originality and power to do battle with those of the master narrative. As Vietnam alchemist, he would filter a war whose message resides largely in his form through personal imagination and render a textual analogue of its deepest rhythms and structures. (148)

¹⁷⁷ Michael Herr was also involved in the development of the script for two major films concerned with the Vietnam war: Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. See Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 273.

¹⁷⁸ For the theoretical background of New Journalism see Hellmann, "The Nature and Modes of New Journalism" 517-529.

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Herr's book deviates from a objective, traditionally fact-oriented report of events and instead confronts the reader with highly subjective impressions of his experiences in Vietnam.¹⁷⁹ He uses a creative language infused with colloquialisms and expressions of the counter-culture of the sixties. Walsh concludes: "The war is presented in a language that opposes it, a discourse rich with a generational consciousness of 'life', of belonging to a revolutionary ambience [...]." (*American War Literature* 296)

II.4.2 Films and TV Series¹⁸⁰

Films

Andrew Martin observes that the memory of the Vietnam war

consists [...] of a dialectic between representational practices and historical experience. It remains a contested terrain where memory, ideology, and cultural processes intersect. Without a doubt, much of the contemporary understanding of Vietnam, and of the intertextual and representational horizon within which that understanding operates and is articulated, owes a great deal to the mass circulation of cinematic reconstructions of the war. (95)

The Vietnam war was fought over and over on cinema screens. A filmography from 1996 lists more than 260 – mostly American - films for the period between 1948-1993 alone.¹⁸¹ Films like *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Rambo: First Blood* (1982), *Platoon* (1986), or *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), different as they are, belong to the best-known Vietnam war films and have shaped the public perception of the war.

One of the first Americans films dealing with the war in Vietnam was *The Green Berets* (1968), starring John Wayne. This film depicts the Vietnam war in the

¹⁷⁹ Herr's book has become one of the most widely discussed works of Vietnam literature. For an interpretation of Herr's book see for example Taylor, "Debriefed by Dreams", Ringnalda 71-89, Morris, Beidler, Re-Writing America 265-273, Myers 147-169, Fudge 90-116, Kennedy 134-149, Walsh, *American War Literature*, chapter 9, esp. 202-207.

¹⁸⁰ The description of the filmic representations of the war in Vietnam is based mainly on Whillock's essay and Muse's monograph. See also Dittmar/Michaud, Klein, and Taylor.

¹⁸¹ The filmography (Muse 232-275) lists "all the American and some selected foreign film I could discover that used the Vietnam War as subject matter, theme or context." (232).

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familiar frame of the Western genre.¹⁸² Filmed with the financial support of the Department of Defense and with the explicit goal to “inspire a patriotic attitude” in the audience, the film was a box office success but failed to attract the applause of critics. (Muse 38)¹⁸³ The extremely critical reviews made studios cautious to deal with the Vietnam war as a subject matter. Until the late 70s Hollywood mostly ignored the subject of Vietnam. Then appeared “Vietnam allegory films,” which are set in a past war and a different country, but are discernible as comments on the war in Vietnam. These films, for example *Little Big Man* (1969), *M*A*S*H* (1970), or *Ulzana's Raid* (1972), take a critical look at the “machinery (both social and mechanical) of modern warfare.” (Muse 46-47) At about the same time films appeared which depicted Vietnam veterans as deranged villains, who often found their last resort in the “nihilistic community of the biker-gangs” outside American society. (Muse 59) The “Vietnam Veteran / Coming Home Film” also dealt with “the plight of the veteran and its attempt to re-enter society” (Whillock 305), but from a different angle: it emphasized the re-integration of the veteran into American society. In the second half of the 70s, films appeared that remembered nostalgically the 60s and the anti-war movement.¹⁸⁴ In 1978, two Vietnam films, *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter*, earned Academy Awards. Both films emphasize “the reconciliation between the veterans and American society.” (Muse 80) Their success ensured that similar plots appeared again in the 80s.

The image of the veterand in film had changed from deranged villain to the victim who was struggling to find his way back to American society. Now

[o]nly one additional ingredient would be required to produce the veteran who could lead America forward, and that would be the physically rebuilding of the passive veteran. This would be possible only after the Reagan revolution overcame the Vietnam Syndrome, and it would result in the ultimate Vietnam veteran, John Rambo. (Muse 100)

¹⁸² The “Pre-Green Berets” films of the 1950s and 1960s reflected primarily “the French point of view or depicted American involvement in the diplomatic or covert action aspect of the war.” Whillock 394.

¹⁸³ One of the most critical and angry reviews was written by Renata Adler and appeared in the *New York Times* on June 20, 1968. She called the film “so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false in every detail [...]. It is vile and insane. On top of that, it's dull.” Muse 40.

¹⁸⁴ Examples for this kind of film are *Hair* (1978), or *More American Graffiti* (1979). A contrasting view presents the film *Who'll Stop the Rain* (1978) that depicts American society as corrupt and the anti-war movement and counterculture of the Sixties as “hapless, self-indulgent, and pathetic.” Muse, *Land of Nam*, p. 84.

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The first part of the *Rambo* series, *First Blood* (1982), depicts the veteran as ridden by flashbacks and suffering from other PTSD symptoms. John Rambo is a psychologically disturbed loner who is haunted by his Vietnam experiences. His violent behavior towards the representatives of mainstream America and the authorities appears to be justified by the utter hostility he encounters from the non-veterans. Rambo is depicted as morally and physically superior to his opponents. The image of the Vietnam veteran thus changed: now it combined the view of the veteran both as victim and as hero.¹⁸⁵

In the middle of the 1980s, the combat film was revived. *Platoon* (1986) marked the end of the remarkable restrictions in this genre, promising to present “Vietnam. The way it really was. On film.” (Muse 118) Muse argues that the “missing combat films reflect a missing consensus about the war itself.” (101-102). At the mid-eighties, however, such consensus was reached. The war had become a “story of universal victimization.” (Elshtain 218) Well-known films like *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), or *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) cast the soldier in Vietnam in the role of the war’s main victim. In the 80s, also many veterans’ autobiographies were made into major Hollywood films, for example *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, based on Ron Kovic’s autobiography with the same title, or *Casualties of War*, which was based on Daniel Lang’s autobiography.¹⁸⁶

At about the same time, a few years after Reagan had named the rescue of the supposedly still incarcerated American soldiers in Vietnam as “the highest national priority” (Franklin 190), the POW/MIA films appeared. These films, “show American warriors fighting a different Vietnam War, one freed of bureaucratic and political constraints, one in which the American warrior returns to his roots as a guerilla fighter and delivers a symbolically crushing – if not decisive, because struck in hindsight – blow.” (Muse 193) The best-known POW/MIA films are the *Missing in Action* series, starring Chuck Norris, as well as the second part of the

¹⁸⁵ Films which depict the veterans in this way are, for example, *Firefox* (1982), *Cease Fire* (1985), or *Suspect* (1987).

¹⁸⁶ For a brief analysis of the depiction of the enemy in *Platoon* and *Casualties of War* see Goetsch, “Der unsichtbare Feind” and “Atrocities”.

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Rambo series: *Missing in Action* (1984), *Missing in Action II: The Beginning* (1985), *Braddock: Missing in Action III* (1988), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). When in *Rambo III* (1988) the hero fights at the side of the suppressed people of Afghanistan against one of the world powers, Sylvester Stallone regarded the film as a political statement and insisted that the United States now had come back “to geopolitics on a even keel. We’re not coming in there quaking ‘What do I do?’ We’re coming in as an equal. We’re now in the proper weight class.” (Muse 203)

Since the beginning of the 90s, the Vietnam war has gradually retired from the screen. The emphasis has changed: Instead of depicting the war experience of Americans, now films like *Dien Bien Phu* (1991), *Indo-Chine* (1992), or *The Lover* (1992) deal with Vietnam before the American involvement. Hollywood has also begun to integrate the stories of the Vietnamese in war films like Oliver Stone’s *Heaven and Earth* (1993).

*TV Series*¹⁸⁷

Three TV series have been produces which either directly or indirectly comment on or depict the Vietnam war: *M*A*S*H*, *Tour of Duty*, and *China Beach*.

The TV series *M*A*S*H*, a spin-off from the successful film, ran for eleven seasons from September 1972-February 1983. It was one of the most successful series in American TV, won several awards, and is re-run every day even today. The setting of the series is a MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) positioned near the front line in the Korean War between 1950-1953. Despite the setting in the early fifties, the series clearly comments on the Vietnam war. (Buzzanco 244)¹⁸⁸ Mainly dealing with the experiences, frustrations and friendships of doctors and nurses, the series takes a decided anti-war stance. *M*A*S*H* has become a widely known and accepted reference point for the perception of the experiences of medical personnel in Vietnam. Lynda Van Devanter, for example, recalls that she was asked if

¹⁸⁷ There are a number of studies that deal with the Vietnam war on TV: see Anderegg, Heilbronn, Rollins, Rowe, “Bringing It All Back Home“, Rowe, “From Documentary to Docudrama,“ and Trotta.

¹⁸⁸ See Wittebols.

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her Vietnam experiences had been “anything like M*A*S*H” (*Home Before Morning* 339).

Tour of Duty is the first television series about the Vietnam war. It was aired between September 1987 and August 1990. It follows a platoon of infantry soldiers through their tour of duty in the Vietnam of 1976. The platoon's base is a remote camp in the jungle, composed of sandbagged bunkers and surrounded by minefields. The platoon consists of diverse young men from all walks of American life and several ethnic communities. In the later episodes, also the experiences of women are integrated, and a female reporter and a doctor are introduced. Although the series uses some stereotypical characters like the tough sergeant or the inexperienced lieutenant and the daredevil helicopter pilot, it offers a realistic impression of warfare ‘in the boonies’.

China Beach, the second TV series set in Vietnam, depicts the war experiences of a group of female American soldiers and civilians who worked in a hospital and an entertainment company in Vietnam. *China Beach* ran for three years from April 1988-July 1991. Co-producer of the series was Stephen Broyles, Jr., a Vietnam veteran himself. His aim was to depict “the world just over the hill from combat [...]” He wanted to emphasize the experiences of the so-called non-combatant military personnel who is “immersed for twelve hours a day in its bloody results, a level of undiluted, industrial-strength horror that few combat veterans witnessed.” Since the series claimed to depict the war experiences as accurate as possible, many women veterans were interviewed previously to the filming. Nevertheless, women veterans criticized the fixation “on romance and absurdity. Missing from *China Beach* [...] was ‘the daily routine and sense of comradeship that existed among the corpsmen, nurses and doctors.’” (Bates, *Wars* 167) The series deals with topics like the corruption and ineptitude of military authority, with the soldiers' problems to lead normal relationships, with the inevitable emotional numbing of the medical personnel, and drug abuse, among others. In the final season, the series depicts the post-war lives of the protagonist, showing their problems of reintegrating themselves into American

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society and their families.¹⁸⁹ “Contemporary critics are divided between those applauding the program’s feminine deflation of war, and those who regarded the characters and their orientations toward war as wholly stereotypical invocations of femininity.” (Saenz 2)

The majority of literary works is written by white male authors. Autobiographical literature, moreover, is dominated by the accounts of combat soldiers. Consequently, their experience is foregrounded in literature by veterans. The literature by civilians deals with more diverse topics. More often than not, authors and directors view the war critically. Some major motifs can be deduced from the literature and the films of the Vietnam war alike: the loss of illusions concerning warfare, the depiction of the war as absurd, fragmented, and senseless, the loss of values and increasing doubt in the American government, the incompetence of superior officers, the dividing impact of the war on American society, and the veterans’ problems of reintegration into the estranged and uncaring American society. In line with the changing public discourse about the war and the re-appropriation of the veteran’s role, literature and films explored new topics like the POW/MIA issue or women’s war experiences.

¹⁸⁹ Most of the information is taken from Saenz. There are also some articles on *China Beach*: see Ballard-Reisch or Hanson.

III. NOT JOHN WAYNE ON THE BEACH AT IWO JIMA – Autobiographies by Male Soldiers

III.1. HOW TO TELL A TRUE WAR STORY - Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*¹⁹⁰

Biographical Sketch

Tim O'Brien was born in Austin, Minnesota, on October 1, 1946. He spent his childhood and adolescence in Worthington on the Great Plains in Minnesota. Growing up in a town with less than ten thousand inhabitants had a lasting impact on him and informed his writing. All major characters in his novels come from small rural towns and “are forced by often global events to see beyond the narrow perspective of the world they experienced while growing up.” (Kaplan 1)¹⁹¹ In 1968, O'Brien graduated *summa cum laude* from Macalester College, St. Paul, with a B.A. in political science. In college he became involved in the anti-war movement and saw his own possible participation in the Vietnam war as “ill conceived and morally suspect.” (Kaplan 3) Nevertheless, when he was drafted into the U.S. Army in the fall of 1968, he decided to go. He served a thirteen-month tour of duty in Vietnam, seven months as infantry rifleman and radio-telephone operator in Chu Lai province and the last five months as a clerk in the rear. In March 1970 he left Vietnam and enrolled as a graduate student in government at Harvard. He also worked as national affairs reporter for the *Washington Post*. In 1973 his autobiography *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* appeared, even though his publisher was concerned about the “somber mood” and thought it needed “more prostitutes and dope peddlers.” (Herzog 40)¹⁹² Despite the lack of these figures familiar from other Vietnam war novels, and despite the fact that O'Brien's autobiography appeared shortly after the end of the Vietnam war at a

¹⁹⁰ O'Brien first published his autobiography in 1973 under the title *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. It is based on stories that appeared in the *Playboy*, the *Washington Post*, the *Minneapolis Tribune*, and the *Worthington Daily Globe*. I use the edition that was published by Flamingo, London, in 1995 under the abbreviated title *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. References are to this edition. The quote is borrowed from the title of O'Brien's short story of the same which appeared in his collection *Things*.

¹⁹¹ All biographical information is taken from two comprehensive books on O'Brien and his works: Herzog and Kaplan.

¹⁹² For the genesis and publication history of *If I Die* see Kaplan 39f.

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time when the American public wanted to forget the war¹⁹³, the book was received favorably by both critics and readers. Reviewers praised the book as “controlled, honest, well-written account” of a “convincing voice” (*New Yorker*), as “a personal document of aching clarity” (*New York Time Book Review*), even as “the single greatest piece of work to come out of Vietnam” (*Washington Star*). Kaplan comments:

[...] O'Brien's war autobiography finds a place alongside other notable first-person accounts of the Vietnam experience, such as Ronald J. Glasser's *365 Days* (1971), Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse* [sic] (1983), Troung Nhu Tang's *Vietcong Memoir* (1985), Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Women's Journey from War to Peace* (1989), and Tobias Wolff's *In Pharaoh's Army* (1994). (44)

O'Brien's first novel *Northern Lights* was published two years after his autobiography. In 1978 *Going After Cacciato* appeared and won the National Book Award.¹⁹⁴ The novel was praised highly by the critics as “a postmodern classic of magical realism.” (Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 11) O'Brien himself calls this novel his first true effort at writing literature. O'Brien's next novel, *The Nuclear Age*, was published in 1985. In the following years O'Brien concentrated on writing short fiction that appeared in various magazines, such as *Harper's Magazine*, *Esquire*, *Playboy*, or *Gentleman's Quarterly*. In 1990, *The Things They Carried*, a collection of short stories about Vietnam, was published. In *The Things They Carried* the author employs a narrator called ‘Tim O'Brien’ and reexamines topics and events told in his autobiography: “I blend my own personality with the stories, and I'm writing about the stories, and yet everything is made up, including the commentary.” (Herzog 105) The book won several awards, was listed by *The New York Times* as one of the year's ten best works of fiction, and was finalist for the

¹⁹³ Stanley Karnow explains in his widely acclaimed and comprehensive account of the war: “As the last Americans left Hanoi in March, the prevailing sentiments in the United States were relief that the war had ended and revulsion toward the very subject of Vietnam. American news organizations closed their offices or drastically reduced their staffs in Saigon, exorcising Vietnam from newspaper headlines and television screens.” *Vietnam* 656.

¹⁹⁴ The scope of this novel was described by one of the reviewers: “To call *Going After Cacciato* a novel about a war is like calling *Moby-Dick* a novel about whales.” “Tale of Battle,” *Times Literary Supplement* (19 October 1973).

Pulitzer Prize.¹⁹⁵ In 1994 O'Brien traveled to Vietnam for the first time after he had left the country in 1970. He visited the places in the My Lai area where he had been stationed during the war and which serve as setting for most of his war narratives. In the same year, he published the again prize-winning novel *In the Lake of the Woods*. In 1995 O'Brien stated that he "[had] pretty much quit" writing due to dwindling dedication and interest in his profession. (Herzog 21) Nevertheless, in 1998 he published a new novel, *Tomcat in Love*. In this novel, Vietnam plays only a minor role. *Tomcat in Love* is his last book to date. O'Brien lives in Cambridge.

If I Die in a Combat Zone

The Narrative

"The war made me a writer." (Herzog 19) O'Brien's¹⁹⁶ statement may be used as a key to understand his earliest work, his autobiography *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. The war experience is the driving force behind this book. *If I Die in a Combat Zone* transcends the traditional categories of 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' to reach the level of personal truth well beyond that of the reality of 'classical' autobiographies.¹⁹⁷ Due to O'Brien's use of narrative techniques such as dramatization, non-chronological narration, or the use of intertextual reference to fictional pretexts, readers, publishers and critics alike mistook the book for fiction, although the author stated that *If I Die* was a "straight autobiography. All of the events in the book really happened; [...] it [...] was never intended to be fiction." (Herzog 41)¹⁹⁸ At first glance, the reader encounters apparent contradictions: The publisher labeled

¹⁹⁵ Understandably, this blending of facts and fiction has provoked a lot of questions as to the autobiographical content and the fictional parts of the narrative.

¹⁹⁶ To be able to distinguish the experiencing I and the narrating I, I will call the younger 'Tim' and the older 'O'Brien' throughout the text.

¹⁹⁷ O'Brien states: "I'm a believer in the power of stories, whether they're true, or embellished, or exaggerated, or utterly made up. A good story has a power that [...] transcends the question of factuality or actuality." Lomperis 53. This echoes Ernest Hemingway's statement: "All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that it all happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you [...]." *Hemingway on Writing* 3.

¹⁹⁸ In an interview with Tobey Herzog O'Brien describes his reasons for writing the autobiography: "I wanted to write a book about the infantryman's experience through the eyes of a soldier who acknowledged the obvious: that we were killing civilians more than we were killing the enemy. The war was aimless in the most basic ways, that is, aimless in the sense of nothing to aim at, no enemy to shoot, no target to kill. They [enemy] were among the people. As a consequence, the fire was put out in massive quantities against whole villages. I wanted to write a book that got at that so I could feel that I was doing something." 40.

the book 'autobiography' suggesting a non-fictional narration.¹⁹⁹ But the disclaimer at the beginning "Names and physical characteristics of persons depicted in this book have been changed" ([6]) nevertheless points toward a degree of fictionalization. Nünning states: "Zu den am häufigsten gebrauchten Fiktionalitätsindikatoren zählen explizite Hinweise darauf, daß sämtliche Figuren [...], die in einem Werk dargestellt sind, erfunden seien." (*Von historischer Fiktion* 159)

The autobiography bears a motto from Dante's *Divina Commedia*: "Io maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza / fesse creando .../ ...fu de la volontà la libertate." (9)²⁰⁰ The motto, taken from "Paradise," is linked not only to the passages in the text that allude to both other parts of the *Commedia*, "Purgatorio" (19) and "Inferno" (92) and connote the Vietnam experience with images of hell and suffering. The motto, similar to the allusions in the chapter titles, also places the book into a context of fictional literature. Thus, these paratextual elements contradict each other. Genette argues: "Das Feld dieser Beziehungen [of paratextual elements] stellt zweifellos einen privilegierten Ort der pragmatischen Dimension [eines] Werkes dar, d.h. seiner Wirkung auf den Leser – und insbesondere den Ort dessen, was man seit Philip Lejeunes Arbeiten über die Autobiographie den Gattungsvertrag oder –pakt nennt." (*Palimpseste* 12) O'Brien's narrative at this point thus contradicts the autobiographical pact. The autobiography is not linked to the extratextual empirical reality, but to other fictional texts.

O'Brien's book title *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is taken from a cadence call: "If I die in a combat zone / Box me up and ship me home. / If I die on the Russian front, / Bury me with a Russian cunt." (Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 13) The autobiography thus "introduces itself in a blare of false bravado, the fist line of a boot-camp marching song out of a long provenance of many designed over the

¹⁹⁹ Publishers were long uncertain about the genre or sub-genre of the book, labeling it alternately "fiction," 'nonfiction,' 'snapshots,' 'sketches,' 'journal,' 'parables,' semi-fictionalized story,' and 'autobiography.' Ironically, even the paperback publisher was confused about the appropriate category by placing the letters 'FIC' (fiction) on the spine of the 1979 Laurel Edition and 'NF' (nonfiction) on the 1987 edition." Herzog 41.

²⁰⁰ "Das größte Gut, das Gott in seiner Gnade / geschaffen hat [...] / [...] Das ist des Willens Freiheit ja gewesen." Dante Alighieri: "Paradies," in: *Die Göttliche Komödie: italienisch und deutsch*. Stuttgart: Klett, 1949, 5. Gesang, Z. 19ff.

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years to persuade American boys on their way to war that they are in fact men.” (Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 12) The title does not indicate literary fictionality, despite the fact that it is taken from a song. Rather, the cadence call connects it with a distinct tradition of American warfare.

In contrast, the chapter titles again are indicators of fictionality (Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion* 170). The narration deviates from the chronological structure, the chapter titles suggest a cyclic structure of the plot, moving back and forth between Vietnam and America. Chapters 2, 3, 6, and 7 are set in America, the others in Vietnam. A clear break occurs after chapter 19: chapter 20, when O'Brien is transferred from the line unit to a job in the rear is titled “Another War.” The chapters set in America are framed by chapters 1 and 4 that are set in Vietnam. Nünning concludes: “Hinsichtlich der Anordnung des Erzählten und der Gestaltung der Zeitdauer besteht der Hauptunterschied zwischen historiographischer und fiktionaler [Darstellung] darin, daß Deviationen vom chorologischen und isochronen Erzählschema im ersten Fall primär funktional und sachlich [...] begründet sind, während experimentelle Zeitgestaltung im zweiten als ästhetisches Darstellungsmittel fungiert.” (*Von historischer Fiktion* 190-191)²⁰¹ In O'Brien's autobiography, the deviation from a chronological narration also functions as aesthetic means to underline O'Brien's dictum: “To understand what happens to the GI among the mine fields of My Lai, you must know something about what happens in America.” (40)²⁰²

The chapters are connected to each other in different ways. Some are related temporally: chapter 1 “Days” and chapter 4 “Nights” as well as chapter 13: “My Lai in May” and chapter 17: “July”, others through the topic: chapters 2: “Pro Patria”, 12: “Mori” and 19: “Dulce et Decorum” allude to Horace's dictum as well as to Wilfred Owen's poem from the First World War “Dulce et Decorum Est.”²⁰³

²⁰¹ See also Cohn, who argues similarly. (“Signposts” 116)

²⁰² As Martin Schulze commented, in “*If I Die in a Combat Zone* avanciert der Täterkomplex zu einem Phänomen der amerikanischen Gesellschaft [...]” 99. But O'Brien uses does not refer to the My Lai massacre, as the name of the place suggests, and thus to the atrocities American soldiers committed in the Vietnam war. Instead of the Vietnamese civilian population, he places the American soldiers in the victim's role.

²⁰³ The quotes in O'Brien's chapter titles do not appear in the same sequence in which they appear in the poem: Owen ends his poem with the quote taken from Horace's *Odes* “Dulce et decorum est / pro

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Through the partition of the sentence, the chapter titles recreate run-on lines in poetry. The chapter titles signal the deviation from the chronologically narrated life-story. Following poetry in terms of content and stylistic means, they create the impression of fictionality.

The beginning also indicates a fictional narrative: O'Brien's book begins *in medias res*: ““It is incredible, it really is, isn't it? Ever think you'd be humping along some crazy-ass trail like this one, jumping up and down out of the dirt, jumping like a goddamn bullfrog, dodging bullets all day?” (11) The beginning in *medias res*, Nünning argues, is a distinctive feature of historical novels. (*Von historischer Fiktion* 195-196). The pronoun ‘it’ appears unrelated, the reader is not informed about the time, and only very vaguely about the setting and the situation of the speaker. Nünning states: “Ein [...] textlinguistisches Fiktionssignal liegt dann vor, wenn einem Pronomen kein entsprechendes Bezugssubstituendum vorausgeht.”(*Von historischer Fiktion* 171)

Despite the fictional elements in the narrative, O'Brien himself insists that it is a “mostly straight autobiography. All of the events in the book really happened; in one sense it is a kind of war memoir and was never intended to be fiction.” (Schroeder, “Interviews” 136) Thus, O'Brien – by labeling the book “straight autobiography” and “war memoir” - emphasizes a historical perspective on the events narrated. “Interwoven with this traditional, ‘formal’ perspective of historical narrative is another sort of formal perspective, one endemic to fiction which O'Brien labels ‘scene drawing,’ a practice, he adds that ‘creates the illusions of ‘happeningness’”. (Schroeder, “Past and Possible” 118) For O'Brien, the truthful reporting of events is less important than that a true war story “makes the stomach believe”: “Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth.” (“How to Tell” 75, 79) This is in line with Paul Fussell's statement that the war memoir is a “kind of fiction, differing from the ‘first novel’ [...] only by continuous implicit attestations

patria mori”. 166. O'Brien inverts this sequence to “Pro Patria” (chapter 2), “Mori” (chapter 12), “Dulce et Decorum” (chapter 19). He thus not only leaves the quote unfinished but also ironically comments on his own development: “Pro Patria” is set in his hometown on the Minnesota plains, “Mori” deals with the shooting of a female North Vietnamese nurse. “Dulce et Decorum” closes O'Brien's experience in a line unit, since he is transferred to the rear.

of veracity or appeals to documented historical fact.” (*Great War* 310) Thus, O’Brien’s war memoir transcends the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction without losing its autobiographical truthfulness.²⁰⁴ It is thus consistent with Myers’ definition of the traditional American memoir, which is “characterized more by wrenching personal development [...] than by smooth progressive evolution. As story, it is most often a chain of hard-won epiphanies rather than a serene symmetrical historical graph.” (Myers 71)

Writing

Writing the autobiography is an attempt to bring order back to his life, to put events into perspective and to integrate his war experience. Stories, in this sense, as O’Brien states in his short story “The Lives of the Dead,” “can save us” (221) on a personal level, they even are a means of survival. In a meta-narrative comment about the purpose of telling war stories, inserted after the second chapter, O’Brien denies the educational powers of stories and is ambivalent about the purpose of his autobiography:

I would wish this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows, from one who’s been there and come back, an old soldier looking back at a dying war. That would be good. It would be fine to integrate it all to persuade my younger brother and perhaps some others to say no to wars and other battles. Or it would be fine to confirm the old beliefs about war: it’s horrible, but it’s a crucible of men and events and, in the end, it makes more of a man out of you. But still, none of these notions seems right. Men are killed, dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry, things smell different in Vietnam, soldiers are afraid and often brave, drill sergeants are boors, some men think the war is proper and just and others don’t and most don’t care. Is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even for a theme? Do dreams offer lessons? Do nightmares have themes, do we awaken and analyse them and live our lives and advise others as a result? Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories. (32)²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Ringnalda wryly comments that “despite what Vietnam should have taught us, we steadfastly remain a genre-sure country.” 101. The not so genre-sure Vietnam literature has not achieved to cast continuing doubt on the unequivocal categorization.

²⁰⁵ In the first edition of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, this passage reads differently: first of all, O’Brien wants to persuade “others to say no to *wrong* wars.” (31, italics mine) While in 1973 he still distinguishes between wrong wars and just wars, in 1996 he has adopted a pacifist standpoint, rejecting all wars.

Second, the first edition names the “truths” O’Brien was able to extract from his war experience: “Now, war ended, all I am left with are simple, unprofound scraps of truth. Men die, fear hurts and

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These lines are deceptively modest. O'Brien suggests that no special status should be assigned to the veteran teaching the lessons of war to younger men. There are no final lessons to be taught, because the experience of war does not lend itself to uniform and easily discernible results. Rather, the war experience is always ambivalent, sometimes banal, and often contradictory.²⁰⁶ This contradictoriness and ambivalence, the banality of war is O'Brien's "lesson", a lesson which has nothing to do with heroism, morality, and simple pro- or anti-war stances. O'Brien conveys this lessons not only through the content of his narrative, but also through the complex structure and narrative strategies employed in the autobiography. The whole of the book, its structure and narrative strategies, contradict the narrating 'I' at this point, and the narrating I appears unreliable²⁰⁷. One could argue that the unreliability of the narrating I in this passage serves to illustrate the contradictoriness of the war experience: Although O'Brien states that the foot soldier can not teach anything important about war, he at the same time contradicts this dictum by writing a book that recreates artistically his Vietnam experience. Thus, the war stories O'Brien tells – and even the word 'story' is deceptive in its suggestion of a simple chronological narration of events that stands in contrast to the artistically crafted autobiographical narrative – can well instruct the reader about the multi-faceted and ambivalent truths of war.²⁰⁸ Indeed, just "having been there" the pure witnessing of events is not enough.

Cultural Background

The second chapter "Pro Patria" takes the reader back in time to Tim's childhood in post-war rural Minnesota. The title, a quote from Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et

humiliates. It is hard to be brave. It is hard to know what bravery *is*. Dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry, things smell different in Vietnam, soldiers are dreamers, drill sergeants are boors, some men thought the war was proper and others didn't and most didn't care." (31, italics in original)

²⁰⁶ In his short story "How to Tell a True War Story," O'Brien's narrator elaborates on this opinion: "True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. [...] War is hell, but that is not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory." 75, 77.

²⁰⁷ It is difficult to give an exact definition of the "unreliable narrator." Booth, who is the first to attempt a definition of this term, states: "[...] I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), and *unreliable* when he does not." 158-159. For a comprehensive discussion of the proposed definitions and terminology see Nünning.

²⁰⁸ For a further discussion of O'Brien's position on this topic see also Bonn.

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Decorum Est,” suggests a pre-Vietnam notion of heroism and patriotism that will be destroyed by the war experience, as Owen renounces this “old Lie” after his experience of the First World War battles in France and Belgium. The chapter uses none of the dramatic techniques of the first chapter. And instead of creating immediacy by ‘showing’ the events, O’Brien now employs ‘telling’ as the dominant technique. Instead of recreating the events like in the Vietnam chapters, he now “represent[s]” them, thus marking a break between his life before Vietnam and Vietnam experience. Although all chapters of the autobiography are written in past tense, the distance to the events narrated is different according to the technique employed in the chapter: the chapters where events are ‘shown’ are presented as more present than those ‘told’. Accordingly, the autobiography contains two time-lines: a “present-past” and a “past-past”. [...] Seen this way, time in Vietnam is present while events prior to Vietnam are past. [...] In this arrangement the present-past assumes precedence over the past-past [...].” (Schroeder, “Past and Possible” 118) Thus, the presence of the Vietnam war in O’Brien’s life is recreated through narrative techniques in the autobiography.

Tim’s environment and upbringing provide him with two patterns of interpreting and understanding the Vietnam war: first, the war stories from the Second World War, and second, the frontier myth central to his self-definition as descendant from the settlers on the mid-western Plains. O’Brien describes his younger self as literally fathered and mothered by the Second World War:

I grew out of one war and into another. My father came from the leaden ships of sea, from the Pacific theatre; my mother wore the Uniform of the WAVES. I was the wrinkled, swollen, bloody offspring of the great campaign against the tyrants of the 1940s, one explosion of the Baby Boom, one of millions of new human beings come to replace those who had just died. My bawling came with the first throaty note of a new army in spawning. I was bred with the haste and dispatch and careless muscle-flexing of a rejuvenated, splendidly triumphant nation giving bridle to its own good fortune and success. (21)

Tim is not only the offspring of a real mother and father, but also “ineluctably the child of a whole mythic America.” (Beidler, *Re-Writing America* 13) As Hellman points out, O’Brien depicts the difference between his “mythic father” of the Second World War stories, “the violent but pure-hearted American GI who saved the world from the brutal imperialism of Japan and Germany,” and his father as he

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knows him, a Little League baseball coach: "My father coached us, and he is still coaching [...]" (22). Hellman concludes that "[r]evolting against the contemporary world offered by their fathers, the protagonists [of Kovic's *Born*, Caputo's *Rumor*, and O'Brien's *If I Die*] go to Vietnam to emulate the true fathers of their mythic heritage [...]" 104) While this is true for Kovic and Caputo, it is not true for O'Brien: Tim goes to war precisely because he wants to conform to the expectations of his parents and of the post-Second World War world they have haped.

O'Brien presents the Second World War as the decisive factor for his own creation. This passage of prose, the hyperbolic style and the images of procreation and birth convey the confidence and self-assurance of the post-war years in America.²⁰⁹ The war stories, the mythology of and the rituals connected with the Second World War shape the perception of his family's as well as the nation's history. That war, in marked contrast to the Vietnam war, "was right, [the veterans] muttered when asked, it had to be fought." (23) Nevertheless, the bright and heroic notion of the Second World War is somewhat dimmed by the "grey war" (23) in Korea, nevertheless, the remembrance of that war is ritualized in the patterns familiar from previous war. The Korean war experience already foreshadows the cessation of the validity of heroic and patriotic notions of war for the front soldier in Vietnam. And as the warfare in Vietnam inverts the heroic soldier ideal from the Second World War, the traditional tales of 'how the west was won' are ironically inverted by Tim's version of the settlers' experience: he imagines that the prairie is simply uniformly uninteresting: "here as well as anywhere, it's all the same." (22) This sentence echoes Barney's reaction concerning the place names in Vietnam. (14) The frontier experience is more appropriate for the interpretation of Vietnam than the model of perception the Second World War provides. The settlers' experience on the Minnesota plains, which "had been Indian land," already foreshadows Tim's and his fellow soldiers' Vietnam experience: "The essential thing about the prairie, I learned, was that one part of it is like any other part." (24) This echoes the problems of orientation in Vietnam and points toward a understanding of the situation in Vietnam in the familiar American

²⁰⁹ For the boom time in the Forties and Fifties in the United States see chapter three, "Booms" in Patterson 61-81.

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mythological frame of the frontier wars and the westward expansion.²¹⁰ By using the American frontier myth – even in this ironic way - as reference point to understand Vietnam O'Brien integrates his experience in the national narrative of America. Thus he structurally asserts the proposed connection between the events in American society and the Vietnam war. (Bates, *Wars* 40)

As becomes clear in the description of his hometown as “flat, tepid, small, strangled by algae, shut in by middle-class houses, lassoed by a ring of doctors, lawyers, CPA's, dentists, drugstore owners, and proprietors of department stores,” (24) Tim feels confined in his rural surroundings during his adolescence. Like a “young Thoreau of the plains,” (Myers 78) he takes walks at night near Lake Okabena and ponders theological questions concerning Paul Tillich's notion of God as imminent and transcendent at the same time. The allusion to Thoreau and his “Resistance to Civil Government” foreshadows Tim's wrestling with questions of courage and the difficult decision to go to Vietnam or to flee to Canada. (78)²¹¹ It also serves to underline O'Brien's identity as writer and American intellectual. After high school graduation “[o]ne day in May” (25) – a phrase that foreshadows, and is rhythmically as well as temporally related to the deceptively peaceful title of chapter 13, “My Lai in May” and thus once again binds the American to the Vietnam experience – Tim leaves his home town for college without regret.

In 1968 Tim gets his draft notice. The chapter title “Beginnings” already indicates the break with his former life, and the first sentence that states 1968 “the summer I turned into a soldier” (26) further marks the change not only in life circumstances but also in his self-definition. Nevertheless, his values and moral judgements about the war remain unchanged, as O'Brien asserts in an authorial comment: “I was persuaded then, and I remain persuaded now, that the war was wrong. And since it

²¹⁰ Allusions to the frontier and the Indian wars of the nineteenth century are widespread in Vietnam literature as well as in the language of the soldiers, and the naming of military operations etc. See Bates, *Wars* 9-47.

²¹¹ Thoreau's argument, nevertheless, points in the other direction than Tim's final decision. But he agrees with Thoreau that the decision is not one of courage, but of cowardice. Thoreau argues: “A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers [...] marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences [...]. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. [...] The mass of men serves the State, thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army [...]. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense [...]” 63-90.

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was wrong and since people were dying as a result of it, it was evil.”(27) In this comment, the distance between narrating and experiencing self is removed. O’Brien’s comment in hindsight serves to underline the continuity of this part of his identity and ties his former persona to the older self.

Although Tim is against the war, he never demonstrates actively for peace but “mostly listened”. He presents his younger self as unsure of his own judgement: “The war, I thought, was wrongly conceived and poorly justified. But perhaps I was mistaken, and who really knew, anyway?” (27) Moreover, he feels obliged to conform to the expectations of his family, friends, town and native country, although his family refrains from influencing his decision directly. But not only a sense of obligation keeps him from going to Canada. Also, a feeling that he “owe[s] the prairie something,” (28) that he has to repay a debt and has to show solidarity to his native country instead of defecting to Canada moves him away from the thought of desertion. Tim models his arguments on those of Socrates in Plato’s dialogue *Crito*:

[...] Socrates, facing certain death - execution, not war – had the chance to escape. But he reminded himself that he had seventy years in which he could have left the country, if he were not satisfied or felt the agreements he’d made with it were unfair. He had not chosen Sparta or Crete. And, I reminded myself, I hadn’t thought much about Canada until that summer. (28)

In an ironic tone, O’Brien describes his younger persona as “being a philosopher.” (28) As Myers comments, in recalling “Socrates’ refusal to leave Athens despite the threat of execution, he begins to separate personal trepidation from general objection. (78) For Tim the classic text is able to provide an example for his personal decision. Tim is resolved to not choose a way out but to adhere to the country and culture he has grown up with. The distance between O’Brien and Tim is obvious; the experienced older self does no longer believe in the validity of models his younger persona regards as useful. The passage quoted above depicts Tim as a young man who submits himself courageously to his fate, although this means dying innocently. This image is enhanced by the metaphor O’Brien uses to describe the farewell dinner at home: It is a “cautious sort of last supper.” (28) The allusion to Christ at the evening before the crucifixion establishes the Tim’s view of himself as a victim. Myers, in contrast, sees Tim’s role established as both “victim

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and assailant” (79) This interpretation seems to be hardly in line with the biblical story of the Last Supper. Further, the reference to Socrates also presents Tim as victim. But both the biblical story and Plato’s *Crito* present the protagonist as a victim who is consciously and willingly accepting his fate. Both stories thus underline the importance of free will O’Brien asserts through the choice of the narrative’s motto.

Although Tim is still in the U.S., the war has already affected his self-perception. He acknowledges the war and thus evil as integral part of himself: “The war and my person seemed like twins as I went around the town’s lake. Twins grafted together and forever together, as if a separation would kill them both.” (29) The war and himself are not only twins, who are different to distinguish from each other, they are even like Siamese twins who share vital organs and are thus inseparable. He reacts angrily against this realization of evil in himself:

With devilish flair, I printed obscene words on [cardboard and paper], declaring my intention to have no part of Vietnam. With a delightful viciousness, a secret will, I declared the war evil, the draft board evil, the town evil in its lethargic acceptance of it all. For many minutes, making up the signs, I was outside the law, all my old ties to my loves and family broken by the old crayon in my hand. I imagined strutting up and down the sidewalks outside the depot, [...] my head buzzing at the deed. [...] The language [of the words on the cardboard] was clear and certain and burned with a hard, defiant, criminal, blasphemous sound. (31)

Tim reacts against all that he has affirmed before, against God, the authorities, and the law, against his whole upbringing and cultural background. It is his own personal declaration of independence from the obligations that make him go to war. The older narrator O’Brien describes Tim’s frantic and cathartic actions with slightly ironic overtones when he overemphasizes the strong emotions of his younger self.

Soon Tim throws away the signs and with them all resistance against going to Vietnam. Tim does not enter the army in a conscious decision for or against a certain set of values or assumptions. Despite the changes he observes in himself and his violent inner dissociation from society, law and order, he nevertheless conforms with what is expected of him. He goes to war because he does not want to disturb “the order I knew [...]. I feared the opposite, inevitable chaos, censure,

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embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all.” (32) Myers concludes that he “is a conscripted warrior whose only early truth among his literary analogues is that ‘I was not soldier material, that was certain’.” (79)

The War Experiences

The first chapter of O’Brien’s narrative, “Days” (11), serves as an exposition to introduce in condensed form some of the main topics and characters of the narration. It also provides the frame in which to understand the Vietnam experience of Tim and his fellow soldiers. (Myers 77-78) The chapter title alludes to the 365 days of every soldier’s tour of duty and to one of the main features of the Vietnam experience: by suggesting an endless row of always similar days, it points towards the mind-numbing repetitiveness of everyday warfare. John Hellman states that “O’Brien depicts a Vietnam where one constantly moves in circles, with no visible enemy in front and surrounded by a hostile population.” (11) Even deadly dangers no longer provide an exciting change from the boredom, they rather become part of it: “Snipers yesterday, snipers today. What’s the difference?” (11) a bored Tim asks his ‘buddy’ Barney. Accordingly, the chapter ends with the prospect of new a day that exactly resembles its predecessor. (20)

The boredom is highlighted by and contrasted with the dramatic style of presentation O’Brien employs. He creates different scenes within the chapter, mixing passages of ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ but clearly employing ‘showing’ as the dominant technique. By using mainly dialogue, often with unidentified members of the platoon as speakers, O’Brien creates a multi-vocal immediate impression of the experiences in Vietnam for the reader. The dialogue passages are separated in distinct scenes and at the same time connected to the image of an entire day in Vietnam by short narrative passages describing the movement of the platoon. “Through this technique O’Brien achieves a synthesis of form with content that suggests the passage of time; not only do the characters’ conversations concern the sameness of the day’s events, but the chapter’s structure reinforces the notion: conversation assume a repetitive pattern as do events themselves.” (Schroeder, “Past and Possible” 118)

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The narration begins *in medias res* with a dialogue between Tim and Barney. Already the first sentence introduces the reader to the unreal quality of the war: "It is incredible, it really is, isn't it?" (11) Barney asks. The war is presented as a unique experience, not comprehensible in the categories that define normal life "[b]ack in Cleveland." (11) Barney constantly asks his fellow soldiers "You sure?" (17) in search for certainty in the middle of confusion. The landscape is unfamiliar and not even place names provide a means of orientation because "[n]obody thinks of the names for these places." (14) Further pressed to identify the village the soldiers pass through, Tim replies: "Tell them St Vith." (14) The unfamiliar Vietnamese landscape thus is appropriated by the Americans by re-naming places in an understandable language and in a familiar way: Tim names the place in Vietnam after a village in the eastern part of Belgium, in the Liège province near the German border that saw heavy fighting during the Battle of the Bulge in the Second World War and was severely damaged in the fighting.²¹² By relating Vietnam to the Second World War, the unknown, unfamiliar, unreal universe is familiarized. But orientation points have lost their value: Barney disinterestedly replies: "You say St Vith, I guess that's it. I'll never remember. How long's it gonna take me to forget *your* name?" (14) Similar to the days, which flow into each other and become inseparable in memory, the names of individual places and persons will be forgotten. This unimportance of individual persons is also mirrored by the unidentified speakers in the dialogue parts of the Vietnam chapters. The primary means of identification in civilian life, the name of a person, is not valid in Vietnam. People are thus severed from their history and background, they exist only in the moment given, not even in the memory of their friends. Tim soon learns that "[y]ou don't call a man by his first name [...] You can go through a year in Vietnam and live with a platoon of sixty or seventy people, some going and some coming, and you can leave without knowing more than a dozen complete names, not that it matters." (85) The language of the war also reflects the social organization of the unit and inverts the myth of soldiers' especially tight bond. Myers argues that "[c]omradeship in Vietnam proves to be an unstable cooperative relationship, trust and dependence always balanced by a necessary psychological

²¹² The general Tim talks to mentions St. Vith as emblematic for the experience of the Second World War. (67) 'St Vith' also bears phonetical resemblances to 'VIETnam'.

distance.” (1) Distancing becomes a precondition for the soldiers’ psychological survival.

Nothing heroic or dramatic is inherent in the war. “It was like waking up in a cancer ward, no one ambitious to get on with the day, no one with obligations, or dreams for the daylight.” (19) For the soldiers, Vietnam is a place detached from normality, infused with illness, a kind of limbo between life and death, a world and time of its own. O’Brien’s overtones of Dante’s “Purgatorio” suggest a view of Vietnam as hellish place the soldiers have to endure for a limited period of time. Even the danger of being killed seems to be unreal and only “a dream.” (20) By presenting the war zone as netherworld in regard to the nightmarish quality of the war experience, the narrating I distances himself from the experiencing I. The experiencing I is in an extraordinary situation. Values and rules that govern normal life are suspended. Thus, actions and deeds are not explainable in the normal frame of reference and not understandable by outsiders who have not experienced the netherworld of war themselves. The distance between narrating I and experiencing I is also achieved by presenting Tim as a faceless figure that remains very much in the background. Where Tim’s voice becomes audible, it is detached, and he remains shadowy as a character. He seems to be “not completely alive. He lacks a firm identity, and he seems mentally detached from everything going on. [...] O’Brien moves like a ghost through enemy country, and he responds to the events with the indifference of a person who has lost the ability to feel.” (Kaplan 23) By becoming a “ghost” in a shadowy and unreal environment, the younger persona merges his identity with the war itself. O’Brien thus implicates that at this time his person is no longer observing and experiencing the war, he *is* the war. Thus, the self becomes both the subject and the object of disorientation and boredom. The fourth chapter “Nights” complements the first chapter. As the first chapter, it begins *in medias res*, in the middle of a firefight. For the first time, Tim is set apart from the other soldiers: his nickname “College Joe” points to education as a distinctive feature between the soldiers which sets Tim apart from his ‘buddies’.²¹³ Nights do not relieve the soldiers of their daily boredom: “Bored all day. Bored that night.” (33) Some soldiers even stage a firefight to make

²¹³ For data on the social stratification of soldiers and their educational background see Appy, chapter 1.

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the war a little more exciting. The irony of the events is further underlined by the fact that one of the soldiers who stage the firefight gets hurt by his own grenade. (34)

Walking is central to the infantry man's experience. Tim describes the process in detail: "Forward with the left leg, plant the foot, lock the knee, arch the ankle. Push the leg into the paddy, stiffen the spine. Let the war rest there atop the left leg: [...] the body's own fat and water and meat, the whole contingent of warring artifacts and flesh. Let it all perch there, rocking on top of that left leg, fastened and tied and anchored [...]." (34-35) This passage of "free indirect style" (Stanzel 218) reads like a manual for walking in the rice paddies; a manual which the soldier has to repeat to himself again and again to stay alert and to prevent himself from getting hurt by stepping on a mine buried in the mud. The impression of high concentration and conscious effort of a normally effortlessly executed movement is created through the paratactical structure of the sentences, which also conveys a sense of slow and regular movement. The language remains unemotional and objective. The emotions of fear and danger present at every moment is conveyed in the following passage:

Eyes sweep the rice paddy. Don't walk there, too soft. Not there, dangerous, mines. Step there and there and there, not there, step there and there and there, careful, watch. Green ahead. Green lights, go. Eyes roll in the sockets. Protect the legs, no chances, watch for the fucking snipers, watch for ambushes and punji pits. Eyes roll about, looking for mines and pieces of stray cloth and bombs and threats and things. Never blink the eyes, tape them open. (35)

The incomplete sentences highlight the immense strains of walking in mined territory. The short, clipped parts of sentences also mediate the suppressed panic under the calm surface. Tim is deceived by his culturally conditioned associations to "green": he associates traffic lights and the safe crossing of dangerous streets with this color. But his American cultural connotations are invalid in Vietnam. Vietnam is presented as a world turned upside down: War, connoted with danger, adventure and excitement, turns out to be so boring that soldiers even invent a firefight and accept the possible dangers just to get rid of the boredom for a short time. In contrast, the most mundane task of walking, normally carried out automatically and without the need to think about it, requires heightened attention and extreme concentration because every wrong step can be deadly. The normal evaluation of events have ceased to be valuable, Vietnam is a world where things have to be reevaluated and relearned, a world that can not be understood in familiar

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terms. The employment of free indirect style in this passage presents the emotional strains of the experiencing I directly and unmediated by the narrating I to the reader.

In this passage, only the voice of the experiencing I is present. Stanzel concludes:

Free indirect style as a form of rendering thought in a first-person narrative situation creates a latitude of expression for the subjectivity of experience of the experiencing self in which it can develop undisturbed, although often only temporarily so, by the other 'persona' of its person, the narrating self. In a first-person narrative situation, therefore, free indirect style promoted the reader's empathy with the experiencing self much more frequently than it ironizes or creates distance between the experiencing self and the narrating self. (224)

Free indirect discourse is used by O'Brien to create understanding for his younger self and his situation. He does not distance himself from the experiencing I. Thus, he indicates that the former self and its experiences is still a part of his identity.

O'Brien summarizes the Vietnam war's special character in the following passage:

Patent absurdity. The troops are going home, and the war has not been won, even with a quarter of the United States Army fighting it. We slay one of them, hit a mine, kill another, hit another mine. It is funny. We walk through the mines, trying to catch the Viet Cong Forty-eighth Battalion like an inexperienced hunter after a hummingbird. But he finds us far more than we do him. [...] So we walk to find him, stalking the mythical, phantomlike Forty-eighth Battalion from here to there to here to there. And each piece of ground left behind is his from the moment we are gone on our next hunt. It is not a war fought for territory, not for pieces of land that will be won and held. It is not a war fought to win the hearts of the Vietnamese nationals, not in the wake of contempt drawn on our faces and on theirs, not in the wake of a burning village, a trampled rice paddy, a battered detainee. If land is not won and if hearts are at best left indifferent; if the only obvious criterion of military success is body count and if the enemy absorbs losses as he has [...]; if legs make me more of a man, and they surely do, my soul and character and capacity to love notwithstanding; if any of this is truth, a soldier can only do his walking laughing along the way and taking a funny, crooked step. (129-130)

In this highly ironic passage, the "patent absurdity" of the war's conduct becomes clear. "Every war," as Paul Fussell observes, "is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends." (*Great War* 7) The primary irony inherent in the Vietnam war is the fact that despite superior firepower and technology one of the great world powers was not able to win a war against a

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guerrilla force and an army of a Third-World country fighting with primitive means. The involvement of the Americans who came to stabilize the South Vietnamese government against the communists from North Vietnam resulted in the disintegration of South Vietnamese government, the final victory of the North Vietnamese, and the reunification of Vietnam under a communist government. For the soldiers, their daily war experiences proved likewise ironic: soldiers return to the States without having achieved anything of duration or value; on the contrary: hearts and minds of the Vietnamese are rather lost than won due to the conduct of war, land is only “temporary, mortgaged,” (97) the enemy is elusive and can dictate the terms of engagement. The only measure of success is the body count, the number of enemies killed. But even this success is short-lived, because the North Vietnamese are able to replace their dead immediately. Also ironic – especially in an era of individualism – is the fact that the soldier as an individual, as a person does not matter. Rather, the infantry soldier is reduced to mere legs. All that matters is that they are functioning properly. O’Brien’s laugh is not merry or happy; rather, it is the disillusioned, bitter, ironic laugh of the seasoned soldier, the only appropriate reaction in the face of the “patent absurdity” that surrounds him.

The Military

O’Brien’s direct address to the reader at the beginning of the fifth chapter: “To understand what happens to the GI among the mine fields of My Lai, you must know something about what happens in America. You must understand Fort Lewis, Washington. You must understand a thing called basic training.” (40) states a causal connection between the mass-murder of Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers and their military education at home.²¹⁴ Basic training, in Tim’s view, is the “apotheosis of all nightmares about army life.” (40)

²¹⁴ This passage was slightly different in the first edition: “To understand what happens among the mine fields of My Lai, you must know something about what happens in America.” *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, 40. In this early version of the text, O’Brien does not specify *to whom* something happens. Thus, the passage is open to include the Vietnamese civilians. It does not single out the American soldiers as the only victims. One may speculate about the reasons for the textual change O’Brien made between 1973 and 1995: Perhaps they parallel the development of the perception of the veterans in the American public discourse. In 1973, the image of the soldiers as baby-killers was preeminent; in 1995, they were regarded mostly as victims and patriotic heroes. For a detailed discussion of the changes in the public image of the Vietnam veterans see chapter II.3 of this study.

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But despite his aloofness, Tim soon tires of independence and befriends a fellow draftee named Eric (42). Tim and Eric now direct their defiance primarily against the Army: "It was mostly a coalition against the army, but we aimed also at the other trainees." (42) He and his friend still cultivate a sense of being different and superior to the others, still maintaining their distance from their comrades and their profession. The lessons of the British First World War soldier are only partially applicable for late 20th-century's conscripted comrades-in-arms. Tim adds to the lessons learned from Lawrence of Arabia those gleaned from the Vietcong in Vietnam: "It was a two-men war of survival, and we fought like guerillas [...]. We hid in the masses. [...] It was a war of resistance; the goal was to save our souls." (43) Tim compares his feelings with those of the "inmates of Treblinka," (46)²¹⁵ thus presenting himself as a helpless captive and victim. The hardly appropriate comparison also serves to highlight how horrible the boot camp is for Tim. In Tim's eyes, his drill sergeant Blyton is the personification of the army and of everything that is hateful and evil for Tim, "a reflecting pool of inhumanity." (49)²¹⁶ He and his fellow draftees embody the forces which fight for Tim's and Eric's souls: By connoting his inner distancing from the other soldiers and the military religiously, and despite the slight ironic overtones, O'Brien implies that, while his body belongs to the army, his soul is not corruptible by the military education. And "endurance of the soul, despite the fear - wisely" (137) is O'Brien's solution to the question concerning the nature of courage. The battle for Tim's soul against the military and its brutalizing influence in boot camp prefigures the corruption and violence Tim encounters in Vietnam from his fellow soldiers.

O'Brien employs a second-person narrator to describe the emotions of the experiencing I when he is forced to be with the other soldiers in the evening who "snore their way to sleep."²¹⁷ In contrast to other soldiers who give way to their

²¹⁵ This comparison is hardly appropriate, especially when taking into account that Tim could have left the Army at any time if he was willing to accept the consequences. Inmates of Treblinka, an extermination camp, had no such choice.

²¹⁶ It is interesting to note the allusion to and reversion of the familiar American landmark on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The Reflecting Pool in Constitution Gardens reflects the Lincoln Memorial, thus rather pointing to humanity than to inhumanity. In the first edition, however, this metaphor is missing. Instead, O'Brien describes Blyton more drastically: "[...] he is the army; he's the devil." 49.

²¹⁷ For a brief discussion of the differing definitions of second-person narration see Fludernik, "Introduction," esp. 283-288. I follow her "preliminary definition of second-person narrative as

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bestial bodily needs, Tim intentionally tries to stay awake: “You fight to hold the minutes. Sleep is an enemy. Sleep puts you with the rest of them, the great, public, hopeless zoo. You battle hard complaint from the body. Then you sleep [...]” (52) The reader gains insight in Tim experiences and emotions, the distance between reader and experiencing ‘I’ is reduced. Fludernik argues that “one of the most prominent emotional effects of second-person narration [is] its decidedly involving quality, which provokes much greater initial empathy with second-person protagonists [...]” (“Introduction” 286) The narrator also addresses his own younger self, reconstructing his former feelings as part of his development and thus integrating them into his identity construction. He reexamines his values and heroes “John Kennedy, Audie Murphy, Sergeant York, T.E. Lawrence” (53) still in search for a model for solving his doubts about going to war and finds them lacking. Neither real political leaders like President Kennedy or military leaders like T.E. Lawrence nor Hollywood’s embodiment of the mythical western hero (John Wayne as Sergeant York) or Second World War hero Audie Murphy provide sufficient models for his own experience.²¹⁸ Also, Tim concludes, “Plato must have missed something” (53) in *Crito*, because he did not record how Socrates “had felt, not how he thought, as a soldier on a night like this one [...]” (53)

Neither discussions with his friend Eric nor a talk with the army chaplain can solve his dilemma. The chaplain simply advises him to have “faith, that does it”, and condemns the intellectual’s approaches to analyzing the war. And the chaplain emphasizes his own first-hand war experience: “Listen, I’ve *been* in Vietnam. I can

narrative whose (main) protagonist is referred to by means of an address pronoun (usually *you*) and add that second-person texts frequently also have an explicit communicative level on which a narrator (speaker) tells the story of the ‘you’ to (sometimes) the ‘you’ protagonist’s present-day absent or dead, wiser, self. In such contexts the narratee acquires a fictional past through the narrative in progress. That narrative projects an addressee by means of the second-person pronoun, and that speech act of address evolves into a narration of the ‘you’s’ past experiences. Conversely, the narrator very frequently emerges not only as a present-day speaker or teller of the tale. ‘He’ has personally known the ‘you’ in the past (how else would ‘he’ have learned the story ‘he’ is telling?) and very often shared the ‘you’s’ experiences, participating in the events recounted in the story.” 288.

²¹⁸ Audie Leon Murphy was not only the celebrated Hollywood star. He was also the most decorated soldier of World War II. He served for three years in the European theatre, and earned 33 decorations, among them the Congressional Medal of Honor, America’s highest military award for bravery. After the war, Murphy suffered heavily from symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, at that time called ‘Battle Fatigue’. He lobbied for veterans’ rights and the recognition of psychological problems stemming from the war experiences. He also wrote songs and poetry. In 1949 his autobiography *To Hell and Back* appeared. Murphy died in a plane crash at the age of 46 in 1971.

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tell you, this is a fine, heroic moment for American soldiers.” (66) In contrast to O'Brien's statement: “Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not.” (32) in the chaplain's view, the fact of ‘having been there’ privileges his knowledge over Tim's.

The ensuing talk with his egotistical, bragging battalion commander turns out to be equally futile as the meeting with the chaplain. The commander, a veteran of the Second World War and the Korean War who tells Tim he “should have seen St Vith,”²¹⁹ gives Tim a pep talk and dismisses him, without even giving him the chance to explain his request. (67-69) Neither religious belief nor the lessons from former wars enable Tim to find an answer to his question whether to go to Vietnam or to flee to Canada. Tim, in Advanced Infantry Training (AIT) and certain about being “doomed” to go to war, compares himself to a slave trying to flee the South by underground railroad, (59) thus again depicting himself as helpless victim of outside forces in line with the image of himself as an inmate of a concentration camp. Again he falls back upon “words” for help, only this time he does not refer to abstract philosophical ideas, history books, or literature but to how-to-do-it manuals for deserters. (59) He compiles all necessary documents, begins to learn Swedish and to memorize Scandinavian place names. While in Vietnam place names are irrelevant, in the familiarity of a western country they are important means to provide orientation in the unknown land. But despite his meticulous preparations, he finally decides against desertion. “The AWOL bag was ready to go, but the dirty room and being alone were frightening. I slept some more, dreaming, and when I awakened I vomited and saw it was getting light. I burned the letters to my family. [...] I went into the hallway and bought a Coke. When I finished it I felt better, clearer-headed, and burned the plans. I was a coward.” (73)²²⁰ Tim is not ready to face the consequences of his flight and to reject his social and cultural background completely. The act of vomiting is presented as a kind of purgation from the doubts and problems of decision making. By drinking a Coke, one of the symbols of

²¹⁹ Tim names an unknown Vietnamese village St Vith, (14) thus providing a link between the Second World War and Vietnam, but at the same time ironically inverts this link because only the name is transferred but not the experience.

²²⁰ The earlier edition from 1973 states his reasons for turning back more clearly: “It was over. I simply couldn't bring myself to flee. Family, the home town, friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile: I could not run [...]. I was a coward.” 73.

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American popular culture, he literally takes America and her values in again. But despite his decision to join the war, he is still convinced that the war is wrong and evil. (27) Thus Tim “arrives in Vietnam an acutely eloquent, introspective variant of the new participant-resister, one whose desperate search for acceptable standards and models would now be conducted within the most deadly aspects of revised American theory and practice.” (Myers 80)

Already in the first chapter, the military is presented as ignorant and its strategy ineffective. When the soldiers are ordered to search another village, the senselessness of the American strategy becomes clear: “Searching the ville, the whole hot day, was utterly and certainly futile.” (15) The operation pattern of ‘search and destroy’ proves to be not feasible. When the soldiers refuse to search the tunnels they have discovered, the lieutenant appears indecisive and does not exercise his command power. The soldiers distance themselves from the commanding officers, field discipline breaks down and is not enforced by the lieutenant who sides with his men. Survival is the main goal in the field, strategic aims are “not worth my ass, damn sure.” (16) The field soldiers with the open consent of their commanding officers thus undermine the strategies and goals of the politicians and military commanders in Washington and Saigon.

The last three chapters of the autobiography are concerned with what Tim ironically calls “the real United States Army” (177): he has secured a job at battalion headquarters. There he encounters Major Callicles,²²¹ “a last but defiant champion of single-minded, hardboiled militarism.” (187) His main enemies in Vietnam are not Vietcong fighters or the North Vietnamese Army, but “moustaches, prostitution, pot, and sideburns.” (189) The soldiers make fun of Callicles behind his back in a kind of talk that could be derived from old World War II movies, comparing him to “Himmler: *Ja wohl, was ist richtig ist richtig!*” and to “Wehrmeister Hintenberg. Guten Tag, Herr Hintenberg, how goes das war?” (196-197) The anachronistic militarism Callicles represents – implied by the allusion to Hollywood’s version of German militarism – is clearly not applicable for Vietnam and leads to defeat, as the

²²¹ The name of the major is reminiscent of Plato’s dialogue *Gorgias*, where the rich Callicles functions as a host for Socrates and Gorgias. Nevertheless, Plato’s Callicles does not resemble the American major. See Ringnalda 96-97.

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allusion to the Third Reich implies. Callicles is “a walking emblem of the overall American presence, he is an agent of order who battles symptoms rather than causes and who would avoid the unsettling history lessons residing just below the surface of the anachronistic decorum he furiously promulgates” (Myers 87) But even this seemingly self-assured soldier is haunted by “historical furies” (Myers 87): He has to investigate the My Lai massacre. Although he tells reporters that “[t]his is a war, and My Lai is where the enemy lives” (191) and thus proposes a simple explanation for the massacre, it is not so simple for him. Rather, he “stuff[s] the burden of My Lai into his own soul.” (188)

Courage, Callicles tells Tim, is “[g]uts to stand up for what’s right. Sure, it’s almost futile – like the last man walking around after the bomb, just to show there’s still people around, but it’s still something to be proud about.” (196) Callicles seems to be strangely old fashioned and almost naively idealistic when compared with Tim. Since he believes that right and wrong can clearly be distinguished from each other and war can be fought for the just cause, “Callicles is rendered ludicrous because of his epistemological certainty [...]” (Ringnalda 97)

Vietnam and the Vietnamese

Tim’s first impressions of Vietnam are unfavorable: As his plane descends into Cam Ranh Bay, he describes the mountains the plane crosses as “pale grey,” they “darken and take on a sinister cragginess.” (75) Tim creates an atmosphere that forbodes death and suggests the hostility not only of the inhabitants but also of the land itself. “You see the outline of crevices and you consider whether [...] you may finally walk to that spot and die.” (75) By using parataxis, he creates a sense of rising tension: “Two hundred men draw their breaths. No one looks at the other. You feel dread.” (75) Then the sentences get longer and hypotactical, thus signaling the forced relaxing of the frightened soldiers who will not “let [the dread] go too far.” (75) But the thought of death stays with him, it is ever-present: “Mostly, though, you wonder about dying. You wonder how it feels, what it looks like inside you. Sometimes you stop, and your body tingles. You feel your blood and nerves working.” (75-76)

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The impression of Vietnam as hostile and dangerous is also underlined by the comments of the soldiers in Tim's unit who peer out into the night through a starlight scope: "Fairytale land. [...] [The landscape looks like a] green fire. [...] It is unnatural. I don't trust this thing." (38) The starlight scope which lets everything that seems familiar by day appear as alien at night, symbolizes the change of perception and the familiarity of things and notions as deceptive. The usual means of perception can no longer be trusted in the dangerous "fairytale land" of Vietnam.

In *If I Die*, the Vietnamese are not given their own narrative voice; rather, they are presented from the American point of view. As O'Brien states, this narrative strategy reinforces the point that the American soldiers knew only little about the Vietnamese. (Herzog 57) Only the North Vietnamese student Tim encounters during his studies in Prague represents a Vietnamese viewpoint of the war. (98-100) Most of the Vietnamese, though, are presented from the American perspective as "helpless victims of random or accidental shellings, human targets for shooting practice, wounded enemy soldiers, indifferent or hostile civilian observers, a phantom enemy, objects for solation payment [...], or stoic and noble inhabitants of a country that has been at war for ages [...]" (Herzog 57) Tim concludes: "You never knew the Vietnamese people." (201)

Women

The army teaches the new soldiers misogyny. "There is no thing named love in the world. Women are dinks. Women are villains. They are creatures akin to Communists and yellow-skinned people and hippies." (51) Women are the enemy. As Bates argues, the recruit is called "'girl', a 'lady,' a 'pussy.'" until he has completed basic training and has thus passed the "primary military rite de passage." (*Wars* 141) Military training thus teaches the soldier to shed all that is "feminine" about him and to be reborn as a "man": "hard, precise, and ready to inflict death without feeling any remorse." (Bates, *Wars* 141-142) At the same time, the Vietnamese enemies – "dink" is a derogatory term for a Vietnamese – together with Communists, Asians, and hippies, are ascribed with supposedly "feminine" characteristics which make them supposedly inferior to the masculine American soldier. But, as Bates argues, Tim seeks to defend his imagination against the indoctrination (*Wars* 142): He invents a girl and her letters. She is a combination of

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characters from Hemingway's and Somerset Maugham's books: she has the "hardness" of Lady Brett, the "fickle and spiritual in Rosy" and is made of the "earthiness of Adams's girl in the mountains." (42) All three female characters – Lady Brett in Hemingway's novel *The Sun also Rises*, Rosy in Maugham's novel *Cakes and Ale; Or The Skeleton in the Cupboard* and Nick Adams' girlfriend Marjory in Hemingway's short story "The End of Something" – have only passing and unsuccessful relationships with the respective protagonists. The choice of female characters foreshadows Tim's own only brief relationship with his imaginary girlfriend and the change of his attitude toward women through his indoctrination in basic training. (51)

In Vietnam, Tim soon loses the capacity to visualize the face of his imaginary girlfriend. (97) The real counterpart of the girl he dreams of during basic training is a Korean stripper who entertains Alpha company in the night before a dangerous combat assault on Pinkville: "She had big breasts, big for a gook everyone said, damn sure. Pinkville. Christ, of all the places in the world, it would be Pinkville. The mines. Sullen, twisted dinks. [...] Her beastly, unnaturally large breasts quivered like Jello." (111-112) The interwoven descriptions of the woman and the land indicate the equation of both. As Bates argues, this Asian woman represents the ambiguity of the land, seductive and repulsive at the same time, a reminder of home and safety and an exponent of the dangerously strange Orient. "Tonight she can be dominated visually by the leering soldiers; tomorrow she will unman them with exploding shrapnel from Bouncing Betty mines, popping up from the soil of Vietnam and exploding at waist level." ("Men" 36) In contrast to President Johnson who relied on images of sexual domination to describe the progress of the war in Vietnam,²²² on the front the soldiers are the ones who are dominated and victimized. Bates even states that "America [...] was castrated on the sexual battlefield of Vietnam." (*Wars* 143) O'Brien thus describes the soldiers, including himself, as the ultimate victim, victimized not only by the war and the country but also by the 'gentle sex.'

²²² He not only compared the escalation of the war to the seduction of a woman, he also is said to have boasted: "I didn't just screw Ho Chi Minh, I cut his pecker off." Quoted from Bates, *Wars* 143.

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The Soldiers

Tim's relationship to his fellow soldiers changes in the course of his narrative. In basic training, Tim harbors a feeling of moral and intellectual superiority and makes a point of consciously distancing himself from his fellow inductees whom he considers to be "boors," "robots," and "savages": "I was superior. I made no apologies for believing it. Without sympathy or compassion, I instructed my intellect and eyes: ignore the horde. [...] I maintained a distance suitable to the black and white distinction between me and the unconscious, genuflecting herd." (40-41) Beidler argues that "[p]recisely because he is expected to be at one with his fellow draftees, the narrator-memoirist thereby recognizes most crucially that he is not like them and, by implication, he realizes at the same moment, the American assumed to have commonly produced him." (*Re-Writing America* 14) Tim's self-centeredness of this time is reflected in the construction of the sentences that almost always begin with 'I'.

Throughout the account of his arrival and stay at the Combat Centre before he is brought to his unit, O'Brien uses second-person narration. It is the first time in the chapters on Vietnam. Now, being in Vietnam and experiencing the war first-hand, he speaks authoritatively to the reader. By sharing the experiences with the reader and reducing the distance to him, O'Brien forms a bond with the reader. This bond recalls the bond between him and Eric: while Eric and Tim are brought together by their common reading of T.E. Lawrence's *The Mint*, now the reader and O'Brien are brought together by the common experience of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. T. E. Lawrence teaches Tim the experiences in the R.A.F. depot - Eric calls *The Mint* a "how-to-do-it book" (42) - this time O'Brien teaches the reader the lessons of Vietnam. By adopting this parallel construction he confirms his own meta-narrative comment: "Can the foot soldier teach anything important about war, merely for having been there? I think not. He can tell war stories." (32)

While O'Brien projects a common experience with the reader, he excludes the other new soldiers from this bond. By explicitly comparing his arrival in Vietnam with his arrival in boot camp, he implicitly distances himself from the "whole horde of boors" (40) his fellow soldiers. Everything seems evil and unfriendly to him; he has a vision of angels and souls of the dead in the sky - a projection of his fear of death.

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A feeling of self-consciousness and his insecurity how to behave correctly sets him apart from the seasoned soldiers. "You are not sure how to conduct yourself - whether to show fear, to live secretly with it, to show resignation or disgust." (76) But from the day of his arrival Vietnam begins to become a part of himself as he takes its "thin inky, mildew smell into [his] lungs." (76)

It takes time for Tim to become an integral part of Alpha Company, the unit he is assigned to. His self-perception does not concur with his perception by others: Despite his own sense of being different, for the rest of his unit he is the typical 'fucking new guy' (FNG) and the typical soldier in "his desire not to be a hero." (Myers 80) He is afraid in his first firefight: "In seconds the enemy tube flashed again. The wind whistled, and the round dug into a road twenty feet from my beer shed. Shrapnel slammed into the beer shed. I hugged the Bud and Black Label, panting, no thoughts." (80-81) He clings desperately to the familiar symbols of America in a hostile and incomprehensible environment In contrast to his panic, the seasoned soldiers assure him that the attack was "a lark." (82) The scene parallels the events in the first chapter and underlines Tim's development: while he is very afraid and worried about the firefight at the beginning of his tour, in the first chapter he is mostly bored by the events. As Barney in the first chapter, Tim searches for answers to very concrete and crucial questions: "I asked how bad the AO was, how soon you could land a rear job, if the platoon leader were gung-ho, if the Kid had ever been wounded, and the Kid just grinned and gave flippant, smiling, say-nothing answers. He said it was best not to worry." (83) The Kid's attitude prefigures Tim's detached posture of the first chapter.

During the next month, Tim learns the basic lessons of a soldier new to the war. And he learns the language of the war: "[...] in Alpha you don't kill a man, you 'waste' him. You don't get mangled by a mine, you get fucked up." (85) He has to orient himself in the language as in the war itself. But O'Brien uses Vietnam lingo only in passages of direct speech, not in the descriptive or commenting passages in between – another means to distance his younger persona from the older self. He also asserts that the war experience can not be mediated in the normal language and can not be understood in familiar terms. The "words" Tim has always relied on lose their value in war.

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As Kaplan observes, “[i]n the chapters where O’Brien discusses his life before the war, the pronoun ‘I’ is dominant, but in the Vietnam chapters, the pronoun ‘we’ becomes central, and it remains so until the last chapters where the ‘I’ resurfaces.” (25) This change reflects the changing distance toward his comrades. During his time in Vietnam, he identifies himself with his unit, sharing with his fellow soldiers emotions and attitudes: “In the next days it took little provocation for us to flick the flint of our Zippo lighters. Thatched roofs take the flame quickly, and on bad days the hamlets of Pinkville burned, taking our revenge in fire. It was good to walk from Pinkville and to see fire behind Alpha Company.” (121) In contrast, he does not identify with the rear echelon soldiers he encounters in “the real United States Army.” (177)

Literary and Cultural Models

Tim tests literary and cultural models for the understanding of his war experience: Plato, Dante, Crane, Hemingway, Thucydides, popular culture heroes like Alan Ladd in *Shane* or Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* provide the arsenal of figures he chooses from and tests against the experience of the Vietnam war.

For Tim, literature provides the model of constructing an imaginary world and to escape the harsh reality of boot camp. Literature is also able to provide Tim with an example to understand what soldiering can mean: Soon Tim grows “tired of independence” and befriends a fellow draftee named Eric. After reading T.E. Lawrence's *The Mint*, a book he has borrowed from Eric, Tim leaves his splendid isolation. *The Mint* deals with the experiences of the British soldier – “Lawrence of Arabia” – during his military education in the Royal Air Force. After having read the book, Tim accepts the knowledge “that I was a soldier. I succumbed. Without a backward glance at privacy, I gave in to soldiering.” (17) Lawrence identifies himself as part of a group that is defined by delimitation against the authorities - in this case, the superior officers that exercise authority arbitrarily and thus unjustly - and by a sense of equality and comradeship.²²³

²²³ Lawrence very strongly emphasizes the comradeship and equality of the ranks: “As we waited for the oath which would bind us [...], there enwrapped us, never to be lost,

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But despite the conversion to soldier Tim experiences, the question of desertion haunts him. Eric points to Ezra Pound's poem "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (1920) to explain why desertion is not an option: not notions of heroism or a cause to fight for keep them from defecting but fear of "society's censure." (45) Not notions of heroism or the adherence to certain values force the two draftees not to flee but simply the fear to be outcasts. American myths of heroism from the Second World War, philosophy, and literature have lost their value. O'Brien thus links the Vietnam experience to that of the literary reactions to the First World War and himself implicitly to the 'lost generation' of American writers. Tim continues his quest to find models and standards for his Vietnam experience. Thus, he assigns to his platoon leader, who is rather profanely known as Mad Mark, the qualities of "the perfect guardian for the Platonic Republic" (86)²²⁴ and Aristotle's "virtue of moderation." (87) Moderation, though, turns out to be not Mad Mark's main mark when he returns from a night patrol into the Village of Tri Binh 4 with an ear he has collected from a dead Vietcong's head as a trophy.²²⁵ Moderation is not a virtue at all in the Vietnam war, as becomes clear when "for an hour the helicopters strafed and rocketed Tri Binh 4. [...] Little fires burned in some of the huts, and dead animals lay about, but there were no people. We searched Tri Bihn 4, then burned most of it down." (88-89) Again, the ideals derived from the Greek philosopher lose their validity in Vietnam. Tim also turns to literary texts in his search of comprehending and interpreting the war experience. A night patrol seems to him like a descent into Dante's "Inferno." Like Dante, who is saved by Virgil and guided through hell, Tim follows the man in front of him. But Tim, in contrast to Dante, is unsure of his guide, asks himself if "the man had not lost his way, that he hadn't lost contact with the man to his front." (92) The guide's unreality – "We dared not look away for fear the man might fade and

the sudden comradeship of the ranks; - a sympathy born half of our common defencelessness against authority (authority which could be, as I had just re-learned, arbitrary) and half of our true equality: for except under compulsion there is no equality in the world." 32.

²²⁴ This may also be read as a pun on Plato and platoon. Thus, Mad Mark, the platoon leader, would become the guardian of the "Platoonic Republic" – a community not lead by philosophers but by madmen.

²²⁵ For an analysis of the enemy ear as memento of the war see Brown.

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dissipate and turn into absent shadow” (92) – corresponds to the experience of Vietnam as “haunted.” (92) The soldiers become a part of the land, a part of the war.

Tim also compares himself to Ichabod Crane in Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” He feels as lost, powerless and frightened as “impotent, gentle Ichabod Crane wondering which turn of the road, which threatening shadow of a tree held his nightmare in hiding.” (93) His feeling of impotence is further expressed by a dream he remembers: he is cheated by a beautiful, indian-like looking woman whom he falls in love with. But the woman, by supposedly showing him the way to freedom and home, only sends him back to his prison. “Her arm was around a swarthy, moustached captor, and she was laughing and pointing her stick at me. The captor embraced her, and together they took me away. Back to prison.” (94)²²⁶ The woman in his dream is dangerous and sexually potent. The lessons he learned in basic training - “Women are dinks. Women are villains. They are creatures akin to communists and yellow-skinned people” (51) - seem to be confirmed in his dream. When setting up a perimeter, he waits “to blow a head off a slinking Asian communist. It would be Ichabod’s revenge.” (94) Women are equated with the enemy. As the Vietcong cannot be dominated militarily, the women cannot be dominated sexually due to the impotence of the male.²²⁷ He has to kill them to regain his dominance.

Literary and historical figures can no longer provide models, and his fantasies can no longer provide an escape. Thus Tim turns to his own experiences and his reality: he plans to write the ultimate war autobiography:

I would write about the army. Expose the brutality and injustice and stupidity and arrogance of wars and men who fight in them. Get even with some people. Mark out the evil in my drill sergeants so vividly that they would go to hell lamenting the day they tangled with Private O’Brien. [...] I would crusade against his war, and if, when I was released, I would find other wars, I

²²⁶ The woman is also charming snakes, a clear allusion to the biblical story of Adam and Eve and the original sin. The stick she wields can also be interpreted as an allusion to the snake or perhaps even as the male organ.

²²⁷ O’Brien also alludes to a piece of Vietnam lore here: The Vietnamese prostitutes were said to be dangerous: stories circulated in Vietnam that many of them were Communist sympathizers who concealed razor blades or glass in their vaginas to unman the Americans. 107, and Bates, *Wars* 143-144. See also Gulzow and Mitchell.

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would work to discover whether they were just and necessary, and if I found they were not, I would have another crusade. (97)²²⁸

Although the older narrator ironically presents Tim's self-righteous anger, he still sees his younger self as a victim. Although one of them, Tim distances himself from "the men who fight [in wars]," (97) and connotes his autobiographical project in religious terms as a "crusade" (97) against war and injustice. But in all his self-righteous anger he realizes that this black-and-white view of the world is not applicable to Vietnam: he himself is not in the position to expose others because he is a part of the war he sees as unjust. By going to Vietnam he has made himself an accomplice of those "men who fight in wars." Nevertheless, he still thinks in historical analogies: "But what about the people who are persuaded that their battle is not only futile but also dead wrong? What about the conscripted Nazi?" (98)²²⁹ Tim distances himself from Hemingway, who no longer provides a model for the perception of Vietnam: His soldiers "struggle with mere futility," (Hellman 110) not with a moral dilemma as he does. In contrast to the role models his education in post-Second-World-War America has offered, he now identifies himself with the soldiers who have lost the Second World War and were accused as participating in war crimes. Tim thus not only acknowledges his own alliance with atrocities but also anticipates the defeat of the American troops in Vietnam. The "exchange of visions of romantic victimization for the admission of violent agency" (Myers 82) marks a crucial point of change in Tim's self-perception. His usual figures and points of reference no longer provide moral orientation. Only the military tradition that Tim constructs from Thucydides to Vietnam still contains some valid advice:

Then the guard started, the ritual come alive from our pagan past – Thucydides and Polybius and Julius Caesar, tales of encampment, tales of night terror – the long silent stare into an opaque shell of shadows and dark, heavy air. Three men to a foxhole: two asleep and one awake. No smoking: the enemy will see the light and blow your lungs out. Stay alert: courts-martial for those dozing on guard. All the rules passed down from ancient warfare, the lessons of dead men. (132)

²²⁸ In this passage O'Brien takes up again, as in the first version of *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, the distinction between wrong and just wars.

²²⁹ See also McCay.

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Thus, he integrates himself and his war experience in a military tradition, but this tradition is singularly devoid of ethics. It consists merely of atavistic rules of survival that have not changed since the beginning of organized warfare.

Tim's own search for meaning and orientation finds its counterpoint in three brief chapters which highlight the devastating effects of the American presence in Vietnam. The three "inverted parables" (Myers 84) do not convey a moral lesson, rather, they convey the lesson of the utter amorality of the American soldiers and the war.²³⁰ In the last of these chapters Tim finally acknowledges that he is not only a victim but also a victimizer when he describes his prisoners as "hanging to their saplings like men at Golgotha." (133) The Christian imagery appears inverted when compared with the "cautious sort of Last Supper" (28) he and his parents celebrated before his departure to basic training. The myths and stories that framed his worldview before the war become inverted. Accordingly, his self-perception becomes likewise inverted, he is "forced to exchange the cross for the sword." (Myers 85)

After all familiar points of orientation, cultural and personal, have proven null and void, what is left for Tim to extract meaning and orientation from? The next chapter, "Wise Endurance", finds Tim pondering the questions of personal courage and proper behavior in a war he deems unjustified. He remembers Plato's argument in his dialogue *Laches* that only "wise endurance" (137) is truly courageous, in contrast to "foolish endurance" that is "evil and hurtful." (137) He is not sure which kind of courage he has displayed by going to Vietnam. "Nick Adams, Alan Ladd of *Shane*, Captain Vere, Humphrey Bogart as the proprietor of Café d'Americain, Frederick Henry" (144) – all those fictional characters, his former heroes, become irrelevant. Neither Hemingway's protagonists Nick Adams of *In Our Time* and Frederick Henry of *A Farewell to Arms*, not Hollywood heroes like Alan Ladd's *Shane* or Humphrey Bogart's *Rick*, neither literature nor popular culture can

²³⁰ The first vignette, "The Man at the Well", shows the senseless cruelty of a soldier who hurls a carton of milk in the face of an old blind Vietnamese man. The second, "Mori", depicts the soldiers lusting after a wounded and dying female NVA nurse they have shot. In the last vignette, "Centurion", Tim witnesses the utterly futile whipping of three male Vietnamese prisoners, knowing that they "aren't going to talk. They talk to us, tell us where the rifle came from, and ol' Charlie will get to them. They don't talk and our interrogation teams rough them up." 132.

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provide sufficient orientation for Tim. Instead, he sees the platoon's captain Johansen as the embodiment of wise endurance and, consequently, as a hero, a model he can follow. But, alas, not for long, since Johansen leaves the company.

But losing him was like the Trojans losing Hector. He gave some amount of reason to the fight. Certainly there were never any political reasons. The war, like Hector's own war, was silly and stupid. Troy was besieged for the sake of a pretty woman. And Helen, for God's sake, was a woman most of the grubby, wanted Trojans would never have; she'd never smile at one of the soldiers if she passed him on the street. Vietnam was under siege in pursuit of a pretty, tantalizing, promiscuous, particularly American brand of government and style. And most of Alpha company would have preferred a likable whore to self-determination. So Captain Johansen helped to mitigate and melt the silliness, showing the grace and poise a man can have under the worst of circumstances, a wrong war. (145)

The comparison of the Vietnam war with the siege of Troy finally provides Tim with the long-sought model to understand the Vietnam war as well as with a hero. He compares Johansen with Hector, the American soldiers with the Trojans, and (South) Vietnam with the besieged city of Troy. By this comparison he constructs a common victim identity for the American soldiers. The arrogant attempt to Americanize Vietnam is responsible for the senseless war. Thus O'Brien implicitly accuses the American government and military. But Tim is well aware of the fact that he is no "eternal Hector, dying gallantly. It is impossible. That's the problem. Knowing yourself you can't make it real for yourself. It's sad when you learn that you're not much of a hero." (146) After all classical, popular, literary, historical, and cultural models to define personal courage have failed, he finally concludes: "You promise, almost moving your lips, to do better next time; that by itself is a kind of courage." (147)

Another kind of courage finds Tim in a passage from Plato's *Republic*: "'I mean, I said, that courage is a certain kind of preserving.' – 'Just what sort of preserving?' – The preserving of the opinion produced by law through education about what – and what sort of thing – is terrible...'" (187) Courage thus is understood as a minimal negative standard, an attitude that does not have any consequences in clearcut behavior. Courage means the preservation of the 'true self' that knows and always knew that the war and Tim's complicity in it were evil. Courage is itself a part of the identity construction: it is the assurance that a core of identity exists and is

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continued that commands ethical knowledge. The evil of Vietnam reduces Tim's self to an impotent awareness. Shaped by law and education this consciousness is still able to judge behavior even though it cannot influence it. The discovery of his own consciousness as courage mirrors the development of American society when it took its first steps away from the war and realized that it was incompatible with its ethical ideals. Here the classic model provides orientation and justification for O'Brien who shows this kind of courage throughout his autobiography. Finally, he can construct himself as courageous, on the one hand according to the definition the war itself supports, and on the other hand according to that which the classical texts provides. Thus, he is able to reconcile the until then seemingly incompatible reality of Vietnam with the culturally determined values of western civilization. Thus, he is also able to integrate the Vietnam experience at least partially into his identity construction. The final, crucial lesson of the Vietnam War is that the myths of courage Tim grew up with are utterly incompatible with his war experience:

We weren't the old soldiers of World War II. There wasn't anyone or any reason to write a 'Guadalcanal Diary.' No valour to squander for things like country or honour or military objectives. All the courage in August was the kind you dredge up when you awaken in the morning, knowing it will be a bad day. Horace's old do-or-die aphorism – 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' – was just an epitaph for the insane. (173)²³¹

Return

The title of the last chapter "Don't I Know You?" ends the book with a question mark signifying the unfinished quality of the experience.²³² This question by the narrating I is directed at his younger self in the text as well as at the reader. Thus it transcends the textual boundaries. By addressing his younger self in this cautious question, O'Brien points at the process of integrating his still not wholly known former identity into his post-war self-perception. The reader is further integrated in

²³¹ The sentence "There wasn't anyone or any reason to write a 'Guadalcanal Diary'." is missing in the first edition of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (174). Richard Tregaskis' *Guadalcanal Diary* from 1943 covers the time from July 26 to September 26, 1942. Tregaskis was a war correspondent with the International News Service and witnessed the Marine landing on Guadalcanal. The *Diary* was also made into a movie in 1943. Tregaskis also spent three months as a correspondent in Vietnam in 1963 and flew with helicopter assault missions. In the same year, he published his *Vietnam Diary*, which was awarded the George Polk award. In the *Guadalcanal Diary*, Tregaskis celebrates the heroism and "cool, quiet fortitude" (246) of the valorous American marines. O'Brien distances himself from the patriotic *Diary*. His Vietnam experience does not lend itself to patriotic phrases and heroism.

²³² For a discussion of the unfinished quality of the Vietnam experience, both for the individual soldier and for American society as a whole see Bates, *Wars* 266-269.

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the narration by the use of the second-person narrator throughout parts of the last chapter. Tim remembers the veterans' war stories of his youth and adds his own experience. His conclusion is at directed at his younger self as well as the reader who has followed him through Vietnam. At the same time, the use of the second person points at the generalization of his experiences:

You learned, as old men tell it in front of the courthouse, that war is not all bad; it may not make a man of you, but it teaches you that manhood is not something to scoff; some stories of valour are true; dead bodies are heavy, and it's better not to touch them; fear is paralysis, but it is better to be afraid than to move out and die [...]. You learn that the old men had lives of their own and that they valued them enough to try not to lose them; anyone can die in a war. (202)

Thus, his own war story is added to those of the old men in front of the courthouse and thus transformed from experience to history. The Vietnam stories fade from "present-past" into "past-past." (Schroeder, "Past and Possible" 118) But the war experience stays with him: "You take off your uniform. You roll it into a ball and stuff it into your suitcase and put on a sweater and blue jeans. You smile at yourself in the mirror. You grin, beginning to know you're happy. Much as you hate it, you don't have civilian shoes, but no one will notice. It's impossible to go home barefoot." (203) The pre-war civilian clothes he puts on make him outwardly the same as he was before. But the war has changed him, he knows that, even if no one will notice the change: He still wears his shoes he has been issued as a grunt. Nevertheless, in his narrative he is able to reconstruct an identity which integrates his war experiences. The image concluding the narration of a Tim in civilian clothes with military boots on his feet signify this integration.

III.2. THE BATTLE SINGER – Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*²³³

Biographical Sketch

Philip Joseph Caputo was born in June 1941 in Chicago and raised in the city's suburbs. He earned a B.A. degree in English from Loyola University, Chicago, then decided to join the Marine Corps. He served for sixteen months overseas with the first U.S. combat unit sent to Vietnam in March 1965. Toward the end of his tour, he was court martialed for the murder of two Vietnamese civilians, but not convicted. After his honorable discharge from the Corps in 1967, Caputo spent six years as a foreign correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* in Italy, the Soviet Union, and the Middle East. He returned to Vietnam in 1973 to report on the fall of Saigon. Together with the investigative team of the *Chicago Tribune*, Caputo was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for reporting on a case of election fraud in Chicago in 1973. His first book *A Rumor of War*, his autobiographical account of his youth and service in Vietnam, was published in 1977 and was instantly successful. The book was on the best-seller lists in *Publishers Weekly* and the *New York Times* and widely acclaimed by the reviewers. Caputo was praised as an "extremely good writer" (*New Yorker*) who possesses the "sang-froid appropriate to a Marine officer and the acuity of a professional journalist" (*Kirkus Review*). The book, regarded as an account from Vietnam which was "long overdue" (*Newsweek*), a "powerful book" (Ognibene E2), "singular and marvelous" supposedly contained "[...] the troubled consciousness of America speaking passionately, truthfully, finally." (Styron 5) *A Rumor of War* was made into a film of the same name in 1980. In 1977, Caputo left the *Chicago Tribune* and became a novel writer. He has written five more novels – *Horn of Africa* (1980), *DelCorso's Gallery* (1983), *Indian Country* (1987), *Equation for Evil* (1996), and *The Voyage* (1999) - and another memoir, *Means of Escape* (1991). He is also the author of a collection of three novellas, *Exiles* (1997). Caputo today continues to contribute articles to magazines such as *Esquire* and others. He lives in Norwalk, Connecticut.

²³³ The new edition was published under the same title by Henry Holt & Company in 1996. This additional postscript of this edition will be quoted as "Postscript".

A Rumor of War

The Narrative

Caputo's²³⁴ autobiographical account is structured in three main parts, plus a "Prologue" and an "Epilogue." For the 20th anniversary of the book's first publication in 1996, Caputo added another "Postscript" to the otherwise unchanged edition. The main parts are subdivided into individual chapters: Caputo recounts in seventeen chapters - with the exception of the first chapter which relates his youth in Chicago and his military training - his assignments, and then his experiences in Vietnam which ultimately lead to his court-martial for the murder of two Vietnamese civilians. The "Epilogue" briefly describes his return to Saigon in 1975 as a newspaper correspondent, where he witnesses the fall of South Vietnam.

As Philip Beidler states, from the outset an "extremely self-conscious literariness" pervade the narrative. (*American Literature* 154) The book has a motto from Matthew, every chapter and the three main parts of the narrative are preceded by an epigraph from widely divergent sources: from an Irish ballad, from Shakespeare's plays *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and *Julius Caesar*, from poems of the British First World War veterans Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, from the Bible, from the works of military theorists like the Roman Flavius Vegetius Renatus and the Swiss officer Antoine-Henry Jomini, who served under Napoleon and developed a systematic study of war, from Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, from Rudyard Kipling's "The Ballad of Boh Da Thone" as well as from Ernest Hemingway's novel *Across the River and into the Trees* and Howard Fast's novel *April Morning*. The epigraphs are related to the development of the experiencing I. The use of these intertexts places Caputo's own evolving consciousness and knowledge about war in the larger context of a history of warfare and experiences of war which goes back to the beginnings of Western civilization. Caputo, as Thomas Myers observes, "speaks in classical tone, insisting that his book is as much about all wars as it is about this one. His Vietnam is a discrete set of historical circumstances, but it is also an exemplar of configurations of human thought and action that he perceives as constant." (90)

²³⁴ To distinguish Caputo's narrating from his experiencing self, I will call the younger one 'Philip' and the older 'Caputo' throughout the text.

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Caputo uses allusions to British First World War writers extensively: In his "Postscript" he names Robert Graves' *Good Bye to All That*, Guy Chapman's *A Passionate Prodigality*, and Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* as his main influences. Cronin argues that "Caputo uses these writers [...] for two purposes: first, as a point of reference which anchors his book firmly in a recognized literary tradition, and, second, as a point of departure against which he contrasts the different, and, as he perceives it, more self-destroying experience of the Vietnam war." (75) Explicitly comparing the Vietnam war to the First World War "in its pointlessness, in its ultimate disillusionment, and in the changes it wrought in cultural and social values," ("Postscript" 347-348) Caputo legitimizes his war experience and his autobiographical project aesthetically and positions himself in a distinct tradition of war writings. This tradition is also confirmed by the literariness of his autobiography, which is also the hallmark of the British First World War memoirs. (Bates, *Wars* 235) Caputo's autobiography is preceded by a motto from the Gospel of Matthew: "And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars. Ye be not troubled, for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. ... For nation shall rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom ... then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted and shall put you to death ... but he that shall endure unto the end, he shall be saved." ([ix]) Caputo uses the apocalypse of Matthew pointedly to depict the war situation, the other afflictions Matthew describes – famines, earthquakes, the appearance of the antichrist - are left out. The passage contains Jesus' only statement on the apocalypse. It is assumed to be authentic because it is handed down similarly in all four gospels. Thus, it has a special authority which Caputo uses to underline the authority of his own narration. The passage also parallels Caputo's view of his own development which he describes in his "Postscript" as his "journey, from the false light of youthful illusions, through a descent into evil, and then into a slow, uncertain ascent toward a new and truer light of self-knowledge [...]." (355) He has endured unto the end, both physically and psychologically. He is at the same time a saved and a savior: Saved from false and dangerous illusions by the appearing "truer light of self-knowledge" he is now able to save the American audience of his account from the "shapeless muck of a terrible experience" ("Postscript" 355) and

can contribute through his art to the national “healing” (“Postscript” 354) after Vietnam.

Caputo’s narrative is tripartite in structure: part one, “The Splendid Little War,” part two, “The Officer in Charge of the Dead” and part three, “In Death’s Gray Land.” Thus, his narration echoes the structure of autobiographical literature from the First World War, especially Guy Chapman’s *A Passionate Prodigality*, which Caputo names as one of his main influences. (“Postscript” 347) Fussell argues that the tripartite structure is linked not only to the special status assigned to the number three in Indo-European myth, religion and folklore but also to the experience of the First World War where “the habit of strictly thinking by threes” (*Great War* 126) was dominant.²³⁵ Following Northrop Frye, Fussell argues that the tripartite structure of war memoirs is also reminiscent of the structure of the quest, which has three stages: first, the perilous journey; second, the decisive battle between the hero and his adversary, one of which must die; and third, the “exaltation of the hero” who has proved himself to be a hero independent of his survival. Fussell states that this “conventional romance pattern and the standard experience re-enacted and formalized in memoirs of the war” have striking similarities:

First, the perilous journey, both by water and land, through the Bull Ring at Etaples and up to the ever more menacing line itself; second, the ‘crucial struggle’ of attack or defense or attrition in the trenches; and third, the apotheosis of the soldier turned literary rememberer, whose survival – to mention his ability to order his unbelievable, mad materials into proportion and serial coherence – constitutes his ‘victory,’ and thus his heroism. [...] The ‘paradigm’ war memoir can be seen to comprise three elements: first, the sinister or absurd or even farcical preparation [...]; second, the unmaning experience of battle; and third, the retirement from the line to a contrasting, (usual pastoral) scene, where there is time and quiet for consideration, mediation, and reconstruction. (*Great War* 130)

In Chapman’s narrative, the structure is changed and the plot progresses as follows: “first, training and initiation into battle; second, separation from the unit and removal to a safe place [...]; third, return to the front. This pattern also involves quest, death and rebirth, but significantly, death is associated with removal from

²³⁵ Not only were there three lines of trenches and a battalion spent a third of its duty time in each, the soldiers were organized in groups of three in their sleeping places. At night, one man had to stand guard, the second and third were assigned to the dangerous and sometimes deadly duty of working in No Man’s Land at night. See Fussell, *Great War* 125-127.

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battle and from one's comrades in arms, and rebirth with a return to the front.” (Cronin 77) Caputo's narrative proceeds similarly: The first main part depicts his military training and the preparation for and arrival in Vietnam, and also the first firefight he is involved in. In the second main part, he is assigned to a unit in the rear where he has to file casualty reports. For Philip, the removal from the front means a constant exposure to death and destruction, since he becomes the officer responsible for the casualty statistics, the “officer in charge of the dead.” (143) After he has requested a reassignment to a line unit, in the third part of his narration he moves back to the front where he is finally confronted with his own inherent capacity for evil when he is responsible for the murder of two innocent Vietnamese civilians.

Caputo's autobiography narrates the events and his development mostly chronologically. (Bates, *Wars* 231-232) Nevertheless, *A Rumor of War* also deviates from the strict chronological narration, thus recreating – especially in the first part of the narration - on the structural level Caputo's unconnected flashes of memories of the war: “Because of the sporadic, confused nature of the fighting, it is impossible to give an orderly account of what we did. With one or two exceptions, I have only disjointed recollections of this period, the spring of 1965. The incidents I do remember, I remember vividly; but I can come up with no connecting thread to tie events neatly together.” (90)²³⁶ The memory gaps are filled with six brief scenes. (90-104). Although they are not narrated in any recognizable order, they are nevertheless connected by the topic – the platoon's searching of Vietnamese hamlets and the ensuing casualties – as well as by a gradually growing rage, hate, and disillusionment of the soldiers. They culminate in the sentence: “We are learning to hate.” (104) The scenes are narrated in present tense, which intensifies the impression of immediacy and vivid remembering. The choice of another tense than that of the main plot highlights the fact that the scenes exist unconnected only in the moment in which they are remembered.

²³⁶ This also echoes Robert Graves' problems of ordering events during a heavy shelling: “The events of the next few minutes are difficult for me now to sort out. I found it more difficult still at the time.” 156. In this First World War autobiography also, both voices, that of the narrating ‘I’ and that of the experiencing ‘I’, are constantly present.

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Near the end of his autobiography, Caputo returns to the presentation of events in brief scenes. (295-297) This time, the fragmented memories and dreams, like snapshots, are divided by an italicized "*click*." This time, the result of having learned to hate is shown: The snapshots depict the growing tolerance of violence and brutality and the reduction of compassion to the point of indifference in the American soldiers. These scenes are located between the identification of the two supposed members of the Vietcong by Corporal Crowe and Philip's decision which leads to the killing of those Vietnamese. Bates argues that the insertion of the short, snapshot-like scenes underscores Caputo's point "that the murders are unthinkable in a world of undisturbed sleep, regular hours, and hot meals." (*Wars* 233)

The experience of time is a leitmotif of Caputo's narrative. After Vietnam, at the beginning of his adult life, Caputo already feels old beyond his years. After the war, at the age of twenty-four, what is left is his "old man's conviction" (4) that life could hold no more surprises, and that he has outlived his life. In this "subtlest and most significant departure from mere chronology" Caputo always integrates the end of every autobiographical narrative, death, already in the beginning of his narrative. (Bates, *Wars* 233-235) The motif of premature aging of combat soldiers informs Caputo's self-description. It not only implies that the war has robbed him of his normal life-span, but also lends credibility to the narrator's voice who has the experience and wisdom of a whole lifetime.

Writing

Caputo's narrative begins with a disclaimer: "This book does not pretend to be history." (xiii)²³⁷ At the same time, "it is not a work of the imagination." (xx). Instead, it is "simply a story about war." (xiii) Caputo emphasizes the personal character of his narrative, and calls it "a soldier's account of our longest conflict" and "the record of a long and sometimes painful personal experience [...]." (xiii) He regards himself as a representative for the men who fought in Vietnam, as a chronicler for his generation: "I have tried to describe accurately what the dominant event in the life of my generation, the Vietnam War, was like for the men who

²³⁷ Caputo continues: "It has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests, or foreign policy, [...]" Caputo's idea of history is that of the 19th century. He does not seem to realize that history is not only 'made' by politicians and generals but also by structure, groups and the "ordinary men" he quotes.

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fought in it.” (xx) He elaborates on his purpose in the “Postscript” from 1996: He aims at presenting an exemplary life story, and by explaining his own development, “to give meaning by turning myself into a kind of Everyman, my experiences into a microcosm of the whole. My own journey, from the false light of youthful illusions, through a descent into evil, and then into a slow, uncertain ascent toward a new and truer light of self-knowledge, I hope, reflects our collective journey.” (355) Caputo alludes to Christ’s descent into the underworld and ascend into heaven, leading the way for others. The metaphor of the journey he uses implies a purposeful movement from a start to a destination that is known and desired. He depicts his war experience in retrospect as a necessary, although difficult and painful, means for his personal development. Thus, he is able to bridge the gaps between who he was before, during and after the war (Eakin, *Lives* ix) He integrates his pre-war and wartime selves into the perception of himself at the time of his autobiographical writing and presents them as unified.

The “Prologue” comments on the function of the autobiography: Neither is it born out of protest nor does the author believe in its powers to educate his readers and change future events. And, most important, “[...] no amount of objecting will resurrect the men who died, without redeeming anything, on calvaries like Hamburger Hill and the Rockpile. [The book] might, perhaps, prevent the next generation from being crucified in the next war. But I don’t think so.” (xxi) By comparing the American soldiers to Christ and Vietnam battlefields to Mount Golgotha, Caputo again uses religious typology for the perception and interpretation of Vietnam.²³⁸ He distinctly describes the American soldiers as innocents, killed for the sins of the nation, thus again denying personal responsibility for the individual’s conduct of the war. Rather, Caputo assigns responsibility for the slaughter on the Vietnam calvary to the worldly power of the New Rome: the American government. But the soldiers die in vain; they are not able to redeem anything or anyone by their deaths.

²³⁸ The soldier as allegorical figure of Christ can also be found in the poetry of the First World War by the American writer Joyce Kilmer. See for example the poems “The Peacemaker,” and “Prayer of a Soldier in France.” 108, 109.

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Despite the statement that his purpose is not educational (xxi), he adds in the “Postscript” that he wants to make people “look in the mirror, or, better yet, into their souls, and ask themselves, ‘Now what do I think? How would I have behaved if I had been there?’” (315) Caputo understands his war experience and his development as necessary for his identity as an artist. Art, he claims, “has a lot to do with what healing has occurred” (“Postscript” 354) after the war. “The politicians, commentators, analysts, and historians still can not agree on the war’s causes, much less on its larger significance. So it is left to the artist to make sense of it, or at the very least to *begin* to make sense of it, shaping enduring art out of the shapeless muck of a terrible experience.” (“Postscript” 355) But the artist can give meaning and form to the experience. Caputo quotes Conrad’s preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* as the model for his own purpose: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel, - it is, above all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm – all you demand – and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.” (351) The truth about the war, Caputo thus concludes, is not to be found in history books or in learned analyses because it can not be comprehended through objective scientific methods alone. It has to be felt, heard and seen by the audience, and thus, experienced sensually. The writer’s task is to provide the possibility for this way of experience and thus, to convey the “glimpse of truth” for the reader.

The Cultural Background

Philip joins the Marines to escape the boredom of the small Illinois town he grew up in and because he was “seduced” into the military by the “missionary idealism” (xiv) inspired in young Americans by Kennedy. He also feels the need to prove to his parents that “I was a man after all.” (7) His strongest motive, nevertheless, is the chance he sees to “live heroically,” (5) and to experience “the ultimate adventure” (6) of war, imagining himself as a combination of Daniel Boone and John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*. (5)²³⁹ He also states that “[w]ar is always attractive to

²³⁹ For the prevalence of the Daniel Boone story and other frontier myths in the perception of Vietnam see Bates, *Wars* 10-11, 24-29. For a sociological study of “The ‘John Wayne Wet Dream’,” see Lewis 21-37. Daniel Boone, the “myth-hero of the early Republic,” was a “solitary, Indian-like hunter of the

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young men who know nothing about it.” (xiv) Thus, he puts his experience into a more universal context. War seems to Philip to provide the opportunity to for his heroic adventure. Similar to many other young American men, he perceives warfare in the framework of the American myths of the frontier and of the Hollywood version of the Second World War.²⁴⁰

The Corps

The Marine Corps provides the ideal surroundings for his romantic notions of warfare and of his own role. The Marines, as Lewis argues, granted the “John Wayne Wet Dream privileged status as battle strategy” (28): Philip learns that “the offensive is the only tactic worthy of the name” and that this essentially means “frontal assault.” The basics of defensive warfare are only mentioned “in tones of contempt.” (15) The “John Wayne Wet Dream”, Lewis explains, “emanates from a fundamental conviction about reality. This core assumption holds that the application of unrelenting energy sustained by an indomitable will shall prevail.” (26) Not only Philip the romantic volunteer, but also the Marines themselves perceive the war in Vietnam and the preparation for it in tactical terms derived from a war that was fought on different terms and terrain.

Philip connotes the Marine Corps in religious terms, comparing it to “one of those quasi-religious orders of ancient times.” He is one of the “novitiates” led by the “high priests” through the “ordeal of initiation.” (8) The hyperbolic style and the religious similes and metaphors Caputo uses as well as the comparison to a religious order not only signify Philip’s romantic notions of the military but also mirror the elitist self-image of the Marine Corps. To serve in the Marines is not just a job; it is a vocation for the chosen few. The methods to separate the wheat from the chaff, nevertheless, are a brutal and cruel series of constant humiliation, harassment, and torture-like physical tests that are described in no uncertain terms and plain language that has lost all hyperbole and is devoid of romanticism: “We were shouted at, kicked, humiliated and harassed constantly. We were no longer

deep woods,” and “archetypal American and mediator between civilization and the wilderness.” Slotkin 21. Boone was first introduced by Gilbert Imlay in 1779.

²⁴⁰ See, for example, Kovic 54-55, Baker 83, 40, Santoli, *Everything We Had* 202.

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known by our names, but called 'shitbird,' 'scumbag,' or 'numbnuts' by the DIs." (8) The change of style also signifies a change of the speaking voice. Two kinds of mind styles are set against each other: the experiencing I, fascinated by the "mythology" (8) of the Marine Corps he is taught, expresses his emotions in hyperbolic, excessively romantic and religiously connoted metaphors. The narrating I uses a much plainer language and speaks matter-of-factly in a "carefully controlled voice." (Myers 92) Thus, Caputo presents a "double exposure" (190) of himself to the reader. Through style and use of language he indicates the narrative distance between his younger and his older self. Myers calls this an "implicit dialogue." (92) But the conversation is rather one-sided, with the older self commenting, explaining, or describing the younger persona's experiences, opinions and notions. He offers, as Myers observes, the experiencing I's thoughts and emotions in the context in which they occurred, thus, "he also provides a wrenching, often polemical gloss of their significance." (92) The significant narrative distance between the narrating I and the experiencing I signals the Caputo's rejection of his former notions about war. Throughout the entire narration both voices are present. But as Philip's disillusionment increases during his tour of duty in Vietnam, the distance grows smaller, thus indicating a gradual convergence of the younger and the older self. Myers concludes:

The narrative movement of *A Rumor of War* is the closing of the gap between the romantic voice and the educated one, the completed transformation signaled by the final disappearance of the mythic warrior to leave only the historical speaker. Caputo does not apologize for or rationalize his earlier figure; he merely presents his untested assumptions and shows how they were inexorably stripped away. (92)

The development of the experiencing self starts already during Basic School, where the romantic Philip is disappointed by the basic theoretical work the soldiers have to do: "Instead of the romance, I got the methodology of war." (14) Even at this early stage his Hollywood notions of the military prove to be inappropriate. But still, the field exercises provide the kind of chivalric and heroic pseudo-experiences of warfare that he longs for. In hindsight, Caputo compares these exercises to "games played in boyhood" and concludes: "I guess we were little more than overgrown kids playing soldier, but, judging from our grim expressions, we must have thought it serious business." (17) Caputo presents this part of his experience as something he can not remember clearly and has to rely on suppositions about his former

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feelings. Vietnam, the real war, is interesting “as a place where I might find a bit of dangerous adventure.” (17) Nevertheless, Philip notes with pride that he has lost some of his romantic notions to the prosaic perception of an infantry officer: “Landscape was no longer scenery to me, it was *terrain*. [...] A woodland meadow held no picturesque beauty for me. Instead, it presented a potential menace.” (21) His perception changes through his military training, and aesthetic evaluations are neglected in favor of pragmatic soldierly judgements.

Military expressions have to be learned like a foreign language. It is either reduced to a machine-like non-language as the orders shouted by drill instructors: “Wan-tup-threepfo, threep-fo-your-lef, lef-rye-lef, hada-lef-rye-lef, your-lef [...] TothereAH HARCH ... reAH HARCH ... bydalefflank HARCH!” (9) Or it is used to encrypt military information to the point of incomprehensibility for the uninitiated: “[...] BLT 1/7 land LZ X-RAY AT 946710 at H-Hour 310600 ... A co. GSF estab. LZ security LZ X-RAY H minus 10 [...]” (14) It is ironic that while the military language conveys a sense of “maximum efficiency and thoroughly up-to-date methods” (Fussell, *Wartime* 259), military tactics in Vietnam were not able to achieve enduring success.

The War Experiences

Caputo's narrative begins with a quote from Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*: “In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watched / And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars...” (xiii)²⁴¹ These are the words of Lady Percy, Hotspur's wife. She is not a warrior but someone who sees the consequences of combat experience in her husband: Hotspur's sleep is only light, and he talks in his sleep, obviously haunted by nightmares of combat. The “thee” can be understood as not only addressing Hotspur but also integrating Caputo himself who tells “tales of iron wars” in his narrative. Thus, Caputo compares himself to Hotspur, the young valiant knight who has fought in combat and consequently suffers from the emotional strains of warfare. By superscribing the narration with a quote from Shakespeare's history plays and equating himself with one of the characters, Caputo takes his experiences out of the narrow context of the Vietnam war and places it in a wider and more

²⁴¹ Shay argues that the symptoms Lady Percy has observed in her husband resemble very much those observed in combat soldiers suffering from PTSD. (165-166)

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universally valid context of war experiences. Shakespeare thus lends credibility to Caputo's narrative. Myers states: "As [*A Rumor of War*] connects American experience to a larger human pattern of self-betrayal and loss, it signifies through its speaker, the end of an indigenous confident warrior mythos." (90)

In the "Prologue" Caputo establishes the Vietnam war as unique experience. Vietnam defies perception in the traditional notions of war, it is completely disconnected and different: "We kept our packs and rifles, the convictions we lost. [...] what had begun as an adventurous expedition had turned into an exhausting indecisive war of attrition in which we fought for no cause other than our own survival." (xiv) Previous American wars have been supposedly different in scope and nature and can not provide models of orientation: "[...] there were no Normandy or Gettysburgs for us, no epic clashes that decided the fates of armies or nations." Instead, the war "was mostly a matter of enduring weeks of expectant waiting and, at random intervals, of conducting vicious manhunts through jungles and swamps where snipers harassed us constantly and booby traps cut us down one by one." (xiv-xv) But although the Vietnam war is tedious for most of the time, and although even the encounters with the enemy are mostly fruitless, the experiences "changed us, and taught us, the men who fought in them; in those obscure skirmishes we learned the old lessons about fear, cowardice, courage, suffering, cruelty, and comradeship." (xv) Even if the Vietnam war is not connected to the previous war in terms of tactics, strategy, and magnitude of "epic clashes," the soldiers are connected to the experiences of their predecessors, since all wars supposedly teach the same lessons.

The first part of Caputo's narration "The Splendid Little War" begins with a motto from *Epitoma Rei Militaris* by Flavius Vegetius Renatus, the Roman military theorist of the late 4th century: "No great dependence it to be placed on the eagerness of young soldiers for action, for the prospect of fighting is agreeable to those who are strangers to it." (1) On the one hand, the motto comments critically on Philip's naive eagerness for battle during his military training. On the other hand, by quoting an ancient military writer, it asserts the universal validity of his own experiences and places them in a seemingly unbroken tradition of "young soldiers."

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Philip's notions of heroism derived from Hollywood films and images of John Wayne prove not to be applicable to Vietnam. Instead, from the beginning the Vietnam experience is depicted as highly ironic and absurd. The landing of the first combat units on the beach of Danang is an anti-climax to the expectations he nurtures about "[t]he Marines have landed and all that" (44): In a scene like out of a "comic opera" (50) the platoon

had charged up the beach and were met, not by machine guns and shells, but by the mayor of Danang and a crowd of schoolgirls. The mayor made a brief welcoming speech and the girls placed flowered wreaths around the marines' necks. Garlanded like ancient heroes, they then marched off to seize Hill 327, which turned out to be occupied only by rock apes – gorillas instead of guerillas as the joke went [...]. (50)

Also, the frontier myth is not able to serve as a model to for the experiences in Vietnam: "The haste with which [the combat soldiers] had been sent to Vietnam caused them to assume that the situation was desperate. The wagon train was surrounded and the cavalry had to come to rescue. [...] Yes, the wagons were there in the form of supersonic warplanes, but the Indians were not." (53) Identification with these mythic American figures is no longer possible. Rather than being the place for heroism, the war turns out to be boring for most of the time, the soldiers are plagued by the insects, the heat, various illnesses, poor food and primitive living conditions, even by occasional 'friendly fire,' but not by enemy attacks. Despite these troubles and an occasional sniper, Philip regards the war as possessing "the romantic flavor of Kipling's colonial wars. Even the name of our outfit was romantic: Expeditionary Brigade. [...] And because it was the only American brigade in-country at the time, we had a feeling of being special, a feeling of 'we few, we happy few, we band of brothers.'" (63) The reference to King Henry V's motivational monologue shortly before the battle of Agincourt from Shakespeare's history play *Henry V*. underlines the irony of the situation in Vietnam: while King Henry's monologue precedes an "epic clash which decided the fates of armies and nations" (xiv), Caputo describes the war - similar to O'Brien (*If I Die* 33) – as mostly boring although glossed over with romantic notions of war.

The "ambivalent realities" (xvi) of Vietnam contain not only boredom but also the "compelling attractiveness of combat" (xvi) The account of Philip's first combat assault is introduced by a comment of the narrating I: "After I came home from the

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war, I was often asked how it felt, going into combat for the first time. I never answered truthfully, afraid that people would think of me as some sort of war-lover. The truth is, I felt happy. The nervousness had left me the moment I got into the helicopter, and I felt happier than I ever had. I don't know why." (76) In his review of *A Rumor of War*, William Styron emphasizes the "sometimes unrelenting" honesty of Caputo's account, and especially of his "feelings concerning the thrill of warfare and the intoxication of combat" (3) The attractiveness of combat and the release of intensive emotions are described invariantly throughout the narration. Philip feels a "drunken elation" (234) when he sees the perfect performance of his platoon under his command and remembers that "an ache as profound as the ache of orgasm passed through me." (235) The comparison of his emotions in combat to the sexual climax points toward the intensity of emotions as well as to the closeness with his men reacting with perfect precision to his commands. In an apotheosis of his Hollywood warrior dreams, Philip feels like "John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*" and "Aldo Ray in *Battle Cry*" at the same time. But in the next sentence the narrating I contradicts and corrects his younger persona concerning the identification with the Hollywood heroes: "No, I was a young, somewhat immature officer, flying on an overdose of adrenalin [...]." (254-255) Although the distance between the self-perception of the mature narrating I and the younger self becomes obvious in the judgement Caputo passes in hindsight, Caputo still affirms his emotions concerning combat. Even after the war, the ambivalence of the war experience stays with him. Myers comments that the

tension between Caputo's attraction to war as a primal experience and his growing alienation, guilt, and criticism of his historically realized example is the moral center of the work, a test of both his and his reader's ability to correlate sentimental Platonism – the impulse to be the ideal guardian of the imagined Republic – with a violent archive of increasingly disturbing data. (94)

This tension becomes part of Philip's "evolution of consciousness" (Beidler, *American Literature* 155). The elation the experiencing I feels in combat is still present for the narrating I. Caputo does not create a narrative distance between both selves; rather, he affirms his younger self's emotions as still valid. He is not able to overcome the ambivalence and present a unified notion of the war. Like the veteran-

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poets of the First World War, he can only “warn,” (76) but is not able to educate or influence the events and decisions of others. Consequently, Caputo concludes: “So I guess every generation is doomed to fight its war, to endure the same old experiences, suffer the loss of the same old illusions, and learn the same old lessons on its own.” (77)

The first firefight is a decisive event for Philip’s development. His show of “Hollywood heroics” (88) during the fight fail to attract the applause of his comrades - instead, it attracts fire from a Vietcong sniper, and Philip is reprimanded for his carelessness. (88) The notions of warfare Philip had nurtured do not prove right or valuable tested against the realities of Vietnam. Neither his romantic images of valiant behavior under fire derived from Hollywood movies nor his equally romantic mock-combat situations during his military education in Quantico are applicable for the situation in Vietnam. In line with this realization, the next chapter starts with an epigraph from Shakespeare’s *Henry V* which underlines the fact that there were no patterns to perceive the Vietnam war in: “I warrant you, you shall find the ceremonies of the wars, and the cares of it, and the forms of it ... to be otherwise.” (89)

The firefight and the first killing of enemies bring with them a profound change in Philip’s self-perception. In hindsight, Caputo observes: “Having received that primary sacrament of war, baptism of fire, [the soldiers’] boyhoods were behind them. Neither they nor I thought of it in those terms at the time. [...] We were simply aware, in a way we could not express, that something significant had happened to us.” (120) The metaphor of “baptism by fire” connotes the experience religiously and thus points beyond the momentary meaning: similar to Christian baptism, it is a sacrament which can not be withdrawn, it sets the recipient apart from other people and signals his affiliation to a group of chosen people. In Philip’s case, it is an important rite of passage through which the novice is admitted into the community of men. The “rhetoric of Conversion” (Fussell, *Great War* 114) is also abundant in memoirs of the First World War. But Caputo alludes not only to the tradition of the British soldier-poets. Fussell states further, that “[i]n many ways it [the imagery of conversions, metamorphoses and rebirths, PF] will seem to imply a throwback way across the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries to Renaissance and

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medieval modes of thought and feeling.” (*Great War* 115) Caputo also places his combat experiences into a continuous tradition and emotions that reaches back at least to the Middle Ages. Thus, he extracts a positive meaning from the otherwise “more chaotic and much less heroic,” even “degrading” experience of the fight that “had left us feeling ashamed of ourselves.” (120-121) He also loses his religious convictions through the confrontation with mutilated bodies: “I could not look at those men and still believe their souls had ‘passed on’ to another existence, or that they had souls in the first place. I could not believe those bloody messes would be capable of a resurrection on the Last Day.” (121) The religious community is replaced by a secular one and the religious covenant is substituted by the military covenant. Caputo again emphasizes the ambivalence of his war experience: “baptism of fire” and conversion to ‘man’ on the one hand, loss of religious convictions and a feeling of degradation and shame on the other.

After Philip’s return to his old unit, he has lost all romantic and heroic illusions about “organized butchery” (218) of the war. The third part of the narrative is titled “In Death’s Grey Land.” (199) This quote, taken from Siegfried Sassoon’s poem “Dreamers”, signifies Philip’s journey into the heart of darkness and his arrival at the center of destructive forces. Myers comments:

Stripped of meaningful political or military explanations, reduced to a primal historical arena in which collective visions of life and death become the combat alchemy for private directives of love and hate, the war, as Caputo presents it in the synthesis of his historical movement, is a variety of social behaviorism, an explanation of atrocity as a cause-and-effect relationship governed by an intricate, unique set of external circumstances, and a plea for the recognition of the power of dark influence and the inefficacy of personal checks or internal conscience to resist. (97)

The inefficacy of the “inner moral values” (xx) becomes obvious in Caputo’s rendering of an attack against a Vietnamese village: Philip and his men lose control, assaulting the Vietnamese village of Ha Na and burning it to the ground: “We did not feel anything. We were past feeling anything for ourselves, let alone for others.” Again, Philip experiences a double vision of himself, “feeling as if I were watching myself in a movie.” Caputo comments in hindsight: “Of all the ugly sights I saw in Vietnam, that was one of the ugliest: the sudden disintegration of my platoon from a group of disciplined soldiers into an incendiary mob.” (288) Caputo calls this

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behavior “madness.” (288) But the destruction of the Vietnamese village causes ambivalent, even contradictory feelings in Philip: on the one hand, it is a purging experience, a cathartic and a necessary relief from the months-long feelings of pain, fear, and frustration of the soldiers. On the other hand, Philip feels shame and guilt, even a sense of irreality to the whole experience. “It was not only the senseless obliteration of Ha Na that disturbed me, but the dark, destructive emotions I had felt throughout the battle almost from the moment the enemy mortars started to fall: urges to destroy that seemed to rise from the fear of being destroyed myself. I had enjoyed the killing of the Viet Cong who had run out of the tree line.” (289)

This is the turning point in Caputo’s self-perception. Now for the first time he is confronted with the darkness in himself, the cultural void that knows no compassion or civilized behavior. He sees himself in double vision: “Strangest of all had been the sensation of watching myself in a movie. One part of me was doing something while the other part watched from a distance, shocked by the things it saw, yet powerless to stop them from happening.” (289)²⁴² Although Caputo explains the incidents as causally related to the overpowering strains of guerilla warfare, he does not accept this explanation for himself: “Yes, the later deliberate destruction had been committed by men *in extremis*; war was a state of extremes, and men often did extreme things in it. But none of that conventional wisdom relieved my guilt or answered the question: ‘Tai Sao?’ Why?” (289-290) This passage contradicts James Wilson’s argument that Caputo “denies the very possibility of moral responsibility” (63) through his presentation of the atrocities as inevitable results of the nature of the Vietnam war. Although Caputo admits the failure of his own inner moral values, he also feels personally responsible for his transgressions. And although he argues for an understanding of the decisive factors which influenced the behavior of the men in Vietnam and ultimately led to the atrocities he admits, he does not avoid judgement by the reader. His autobiography attempts to make sense out of what had happened, not only for him, but also for his fellow veterans and the reader. Philip cannot answer the question. “Why?” As the double vision signifies which he develops, he cannot find a connecting thread to integrate both sides of himself. The

²⁴² Winnie Smith describes the flashbacks after her return from Vietnam in similar terms as “reels of a movie. [...] I have been as much a participant in their coming as a spectator.” (*American Daughter* 297)

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narrating I admits that he still searches for explanations for his emotions: “although I have had a decade to think about it,” he can only guess that they result from “combat fatigue” or a “delayed reaction to some previous experience.” (297)

Vietnam and the Vietnamese

Vietnam is not the cultural other, it is the cultural void, a land at the beginning of existence, devoid of moral standards and signposts of western civilization:

There was nothing familiar out where we were, no churches, no police, no laws, no newspapers, or any of the restraining influences without which the earth's population of virtuous people would be reduced by ninety-five percent. It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush, an ethical as well as a geographical wilderness. Out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state. The descent could be checked only by the net of a man's inner moral values, the attribute that is called character. There were a few – and I suspect Lieutenant Calley was one – who had no net and plunged all the way down, discovering in their bottommost depths a capacity for malice they probably never suspected was there. (xx)²⁴³

Myers regards this passage as crucial: “The ability or willingness to accept this passage is the hub of reader response to the narrative, for it serves as an abstract, in tone and substance, of the moral drift of the book.” (91) Caputo's explanation for the moral deterioration of American soldiers in the passage quoted above also echoes Marlowe's reasoning about Kurtz's moral deterioration:

You can't understand. How could you? – with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums – how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude – utter solitude without a policeman – by the way of silence – utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. (85)

In both cases, no cultural institutions that carry moral or the authority of the state are present. While in Kurtz's case “silence” and “solitude,” the utter absence of

²⁴³ Lieutenant William Calley was the officer who led the platoon that was responsible for the My Lai massacre on March 16, 1968, killing up to 500 unarmed civilians and destroying the village completely. In 1970, Calley was convicted of murder of twenty-two Vietnamese and sentenced to life-long imprisonment. In 1974, nevertheless, he was pardoned by President Nixon and released from prison. See Hillstrom/Hillstrom 30-37.

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restraining cultural influences throw him back on his own “innate strength,” in Caputo’s case the institutions the very institution which carries authority, the military which sanctions the men to kill, the circumstances of war and the presence of the “relentless enemy” are responsible for the “brutish state” of the soldiers. In both cases, the men have to rely on their own “inner moral values.” But the battle to avoid the descent into a “brutish state” is already lost before the Americans arrive in Vietnam, since “[t]he evil was inherent not in the men – except in the sense that a devil dwells in us all - but in the circumstances under which they had to live and fight. [...] Twenty years of terrorism and fratricide had obliterated most reference points from the country’s moral map long before we arrived.” (xviii) Caputo thus presents the land itself as corrupted by war and the war as corrupting the American soldiers. The emphasis on the futility of resistance against those evil, even diabolical outside powers serves to transfer personal responsibility away from the individual soldier. Instead, the specific circumstances in Vietnam, the country’s history, and the conduct of the war are held responsible. Philip can be compared to Kurtz only insofar that both descend into the “heart of darkness.” Myers argues: “Caputo’s delineation of darkness proves to be as absolute and formative as Conrad’s, the difference being that Caputo returns as the custodian of his own memoir and chronicler of his own evil and penance.” (91) Caputo narrates the experiencing I’s “descent into evil, and [...] a slow, uncertain ascent toward a new and truer life of self-knowledge.” (“Postscript” 355) In telling his story the narrating I follows the experiencing I almost as Marlowe followed Kurtz; and Caputo, like Marlowe, narrates the journey of his younger self as a “sympathetic apologist” (Bates, *Wars* 23)

The “ethical and geographical wilderness” Caputo encounters in Vietnam mirrors the Puritan dual understanding of wilderness on the one hand as inner unconverted state before a conversion experience takes place, and on the other hand as its outward equivalent, the geographical wilderness of the early Puritan colonies of New England.²⁴⁴ Thus, the journey towards spiritual awakening finds its parallel in the conversion of the “howling wilderness” (1 Deut. 32,10) into a ‘City Upon A

²⁴⁴ For a discussion of the understanding of Vietnam in terms of Puritan typology and religious beliefs see Bates, *Wars* 12-24. Bates also offers a brief interpretation of the film *Apocalypse Now* and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. See 17-24.

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Hill.' Caputo applies Puritan typology to the interpretation of his Vietnam experience but reverses the image of the journey from darkness to the light of God: Due to the circumstances, the inward traveler in Vietnam journeys away from the light of civilization and ethics toward the heart of darkness. Bates concludes: "Caputo's memoir is a Puritan tale of degeneration through violence." (36) Caputo emphasizes the importance of living conditions and climate in the "howling wilderness" of Vietnam:

For weeks we had to live like primitive men on remote outposts rimmed by alien seas of rice paddies and rain forests. Malaria, black-water fever, and dysentery, though not the killers they had been in past wars, took their toll. The sun scorched us in the dry season, and in the monsoon season we were pounded numb by ceaseless rain. Our days were spent hacking through mountainous jungles whose immensity reduced us to antlike pettiness. (xix).

The image of the outposts of progress in the alien, uncivilized land also bears overtones of Marlowe's description of the trading post on the Congo river in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam. [...] We [...] went on, landed custom house clerks to levy toll in what looks like a God-forsaken wilderness, with a tin shed and a flagpole lost in it [...]. Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had not moved; but we passed various places – trading places – with names [...] that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister black cloth. (40)

Caputo experiences the Vietnamese landscape itself as dangerous and frightening, as "one of the last of the dark regions on earth, and only the very brave or the very dull [...] could look at it without feeling fear" (104), thus echoing again Marlowe's half-fascinated, half-repulsed description of Kurtz's station.²⁴⁵ The metaphor of darkness underlines his description of Vietnam as at "the dawn of creation" (xx) At the same time, it hints at the utter hostility of the land itself, and also at the descent into a moral abyss awaiting the soldiers. When Philip collaborates in the murder of two Vietnamese civilians, he states. "The thing we had done was a result of what the war had done to us." (309) Bates concludes: "Though Caputo accepts personal

²⁴⁵"Of course you may be too much of a fool to go wrong – too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness. I take it, no fool ever made a bargain for his soul with the devil [...]." (85) In contrast to Conrad, Caputo does not hint at a pact with the devil, but emphasizes the feeling of fear – soldiers in Vietnam had the chance to get away with their souls and bodies intact.

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responsibility for his deed, he also believes that the physical setting had released the horror within [...]" (36)

Early into his tour, Philip has not yet lost the capability to feel the horror of atrocities and compassion even for the enemy. When he witnesses the bombardment of Vietcong positions he "pitied [the Vietcong]. [...] In those days, I tended to look upon war as an outdoor sport, and the shelling seemed, well, unfair." (110) As signaled by the inserted pause, the hesitant "well," the narrating I seems reluctant to relate the emotions of the experiencing I. The notion of fairness and the view of the war as an "outdoor sport" are so grossly out of place for the narrating I that he can hardly understand them in hindsight. In the next sentence, the narrative distance between older and younger self is emphasized in the comment of the narrating I: "But this was early in the war: later, I would be able to see enemy soldiers incinerated by napalm and feel quite happy about it." (110) Caputo ascribes his own change and the numbing of his feelings as well as those of the whole company to the fact that they have killed: "[...] once men begin killing it is not easy to stop them." (111) Also, the specific situation is responsible for the committing of atrocities. Caputo comments on the execution of a wounded Vietcong at point-blank range by one of his fellow soldiers: "[...] in that dangerous swamp it seemed a perfectly natural thing to do." (112) Murder is no longer sanctioned but natural in the dangerous netherworld of Vietnam.

When Philip comes across the body of a dead enemy soldier about his own age, he tries not to think of him as a human being "but as a dead enemy." (113) The gentlemanly notions of fairness toward the enemy are a luxury he can no longer afford as he is directly confronted with death and with a dead young man who resembles himself. Consequently, he sheds all his compassionate feelings. This is mirrored in the brutal language of the field he now uses: "I had begun the patrol with the idea of capturing the guerrilla, but now all I wanted to do was kill him. Waste the little bastard [...]" (114) But when he and his men discover in a village a packet of letters and photographs that show Vietcong fighters and their friends and families, he can no longer maintain his distance and dehumanize the enemy. Instead, he partly identifies himself with the enemy: "They're just like us [...]. It's always the young men who die." (117) Caputo extends the notion of the bonding of

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men under fire even to integrate the enemy. By emphasizing that “[i]t’s always the young men who die,” he constructs a community of victims of the Vietnam war, which transcends nationalities and political worldviews and includes all soldiers regardless of which side they fight on. In hindsight, Caputo concludes:

[...] for all its intensity, our Marine training had not completely erased the years we had spent at home, at school, in church, learning that human life was precious and the taking of it wrong. The drill fields and the first two month in Vietnam had dulled, but not deadened, our sensibilities. We retained a capacity for remorse and had not yet reached the stage of moral and emotional numbness. (117)

After a short time in Vietnam, the descent “into evil” (“Postscript” 355) is not yet complete; the “net of [...] inner moral values, the attribute that is called character” (xx) still holds. Myers concludes that in the first phase of Philip’s Vietnam experience, he “he retains the capacity for remorse for the dead, for disgust at atrocities, even for sympathy for the enemy, but the seeds of personal transformation have already been planted in the heat and the grime of jungle warfare.” (95)

Through the combat experience and the primitive living conditions in the field, Philip feels more distanced from his own army than from the Vietcong: “Eating the rice on that desolate hill, it occurred to me that we were becoming more and more like our enemy. We ate what they ate. We could now move through the jungle as stealthily as they. We endured common miseries. In fact, we had more in common with the Viet Cong than we did with that army of clerks and staff officers in the rear.” (162) He proposes a common identity with those who go through the same experiences, even with the enemy. At the same time, he distances himself from the soldiers in the rear echelons. Thus, he distances himself from his former role as staff officer and affirms the view of himself as a combat soldier.

After Philip’s return to his line unit, the feeling of guilt, the compelling intensity of combat, together with an intense hatred of the Vietcong and “desire of retribution” (219) for the deaths of his friends erases the ambiguous feeling for the enemy. Out on patrol with the platoon, he feels as if he is looking into the heart of darkness: “It was a void, and staring at it, I felt that I was looking at the center of all the darkness

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in the world.” (225)²⁴⁶ The Vietnamese landscape symbolizes the cultural and ethical void in the men, the abyss of immorality that Caputo and his men descend into. The nearly moral-free space of the war as well as the daily frustrations and strains of the futile search for the Vietcong snipers, who shoot at the Americans and disappear before the soldiers can locate them, lead to Philip’s “first violence fantasy:” He imagines beating up a peasant women until she tells him where the Vietcong fighters hide. But he refrains from actually doing it: “There was no one out there to stop me from actually doing it, no one and nothing except that inner system of moral checks called conscience. That was still operating, so I didn’t touch the old woman.” (242) The compassion for the enemy and the sense of being unfair when using the American superior weaponry he had felt before are completely lost. Only his “net of inner values” (xx) still holds Philip back from transforming fantasy into real action.

The Soldiers

From the beginning of his narrative, Caputo idealizes the bond of the soldiers in infantry units as unbreakable and transcendent, being superior even to that between lovers because: “[i]t does not demand for its sustenance the reciprocity, the pledges of affection, the endless reassurances required by the love of men and women. It is, unlike marriage, a bond that cannot be broken by a word, by boredom or divorce, or by anything other than death. Sometimes even that is not strong enough.”(xvii) But Caputo admits that this is a bond born out of necessity and not of inclination:

The battlefields of Vietnam were a crucible in which a generation of American soldiers were fused together by a common confrontation with death and a sharing of hardships, dangers, and fears. The very ugliness of the war, the sordidness of our daily lives, the degradation of having to take part in body counts made us draw still closer to one another. It was as if in comradeship we found an affirmation of life and the means to preserve at least a vestige of our humanity. (xvii)

The close bond between the soldiers results from the shared experiences, a means to affirm life amidst of death and to preserve humanity in contrast to the inhumanity which surrounds the soldiers. He constructs a common identity for combat soldiers which is defined not only through common experiences but also through the sense

²⁴⁶ Caputo again alludes to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, see for example 108.

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of being distanced from all other groups and by the sense of “how deeply we had been changed, how different we were from everyone who had not shared with us the miseries of the monsoon, the exhausting patrols, the fear of a combat assault on a hot landing zone.” (xvi)

The communal experience of the first firefight leads to a closer bonding of the men than before. Philip senses a “new and harder strands to the bonds that had united [the soldiers] before [...], strands woven by the experience of being under fire together and the guilt of shedding first blood together, by dangers and hardships shared.” (128) He also observes his own change from a naive, romantic young man who had perceived the people around him “as tough guys who at heart were decent and good,” (128) very much like characters in the war movies and novels of his youth, to a more sober and realistic view of his fellow soldiers as “fairly ordinary men who sometimes performed extraordinary acts in the stress of combat, acts of bravery as well as cruelty.” (129) But the close bond of the men is only temporary; after his assignment to the Regimental Headquarter Unit in the rear, Philip realizes that a temporary transfer to the rear is enough to turn him into an “outsider” (148) for his old company. He is already as severed from the “body”, the “corps,” as his dead comrades.

After his return to his old unit, however, he is integrated into the old bond again. He affirms this bond and distances himself emotionally from all other groups. This becomes obvious when several of his men fall victim to a hidden mine. “Carrying [one of the wounded], I felt my own anger, a very cold, very deep anger that had no specific object. It was just an icy, abiding fury, a hatred for everything in existence except those men. Yes, except those men of mine, any of whom was better than all the men who had sent them to war.” (268) Explicitly excluded are the rear-echelon American soldiers. The unbridgeable gap between combat and rear-echelon soldiers becomes clear when Philip contradicts and even threatens his superior officer to get medical help for one of his men. (269) With this episode, Caputo not only illustrates the different sets of values of combat and support soldiers, but also presents himself as a caring and courageous leader who even defies the authorities for the sake of his men.

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Caputo inserts an elegy for Walter Levy, one of his friends who died in Vietnam, into his narrative. He addresses him directly:

[...] [I]f I could remember what you said, I could make you speak again on this page [...]. [Y]ou embodied the best that was in us. You were a part of us, and a part of us died with you, the small part that was still young, that had not yet grown cynical, grown bitter and old with death. Your courage was an example to us, and whatever the rights or wrongs of the war, nothing can diminish the rightness of what you tried to do. Yours was the greater love. You died for the man you tried to save, and you died *pro patria*. [...] You were faithful. Your country was not. As I write this, eleven years after your death, the country for which you died wishes to forget the war in which you died. [...] It wishes to forget and has forgotten. But there are a few of us who do remember because of the small things that made us love you [...]. We loved you for what you were and what you stood for. (212-213)

Since Caputo cannot remember Levy's words and thus revive him, all that is left for him is to build for his friend a memorial in words – Levy is one of the two men the book is dedicated to. Levy's death also symbolizes the death of everything that constituted Caputo's younger, carefree, idealistic self. By memorializing his friend in the autobiography, Caputo at the same memorializes his own pre-war self. The "collective amnesia" (Herring 264) of American society concerning the war and the warriors is paralleled in Caputo's own problems of remembering. The difference is that America consciously forgets and Caputo unconsciously, that is, he tries to recover all the memories indiscriminately. The incompleteness of this recovery makes Caputo feel a kind of survivor's guilt he can never repay. (Bates, *Wars* 236)

The only people he still can identify himself with are the fellow combat soldiers of his unit. Although flirting with the thought of desertion during his "Rest and Recuperation" in Saigon, he realizes that he could never desert his comrades in arms. In an epiphanic moment, he understands that "[e]ach of us fought for himself and for the men beside him. The only way out of Vietnam, besides death or wounds, was to fight your way out. We fought to live." (235) But feeling compassion for anyone other than his men is ultimately over: When he orders the shelling of a Vietnamese village, he recognizes that he is emotionally completely numb: "I did not feel a sense of vengeance, any more than I felt remorse or regret. I did not even feel angry. [...] I did not feel anything at all." (270) The war has become a matter of personal loyalties only, void of morals or politics or a "cause that is destined to

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triumph.” (xiv) The void he had looked into does not only symbolizes the ethical and moral void as the absence of something good and valuable; it also stands for the utter senselessness of the war. It has become obvious for Philip that military success will ultimately be denied to the American soldiers: victories are difficult to achieve when trying to engage an elusive enemy whose primary weapons are mines and booby traps: “It was not warfare. It was murder. [...] Walking down the trains, waiting for those things to explode, we had begun to feel more like victims than soldiers.” (273) Serving no larger purpose, Caputo presents the war as a self-contained, immoral, pre-civilized world in which survival is the only goal, and obligation to his fellow soldiers the only morally binding force.

The Rear

The second part of the autobiography presents Philip as “The Officer in Charge of the Dead,” serving as an assistant staff officer in the rear. The sarcastic lines from Siegfried Sassoon’s poem “The Effect” which precede this section – “How many dead? As many as ever you wish. / Don’t count ‘em; they’re too many. / Who’ll buy my nice fresh corpses, two a penny?” - set the tone of absurdity and prefigure Philip’s experiences.

Philip’s occupation in the rear consists mainly of casualty reporting, i.e. filing the reported casualties correctly and registering the different kinds of casualties on a blackboard. “My unsung task in that statistical war was to do the arithmetic. If I had been an agent of death as a platoon leader, as a staff officer I was death’s bookkeeper.” (160) His ironic job description implies the change in his self-perception: from activity to passivity, from a leading to a subject position. It also implies the distance between the men in the field and those in the rear and the incompatibility of their experiences. “It was a [...] job that gave me a lot of bad dreams, though it had also the beneficial effect of cauterizing whatever silly, abstract, romantic ideas I still had about war.” (157)

Philip gets to know death’s sights and smells very intimately. He also learns the euphemistic language of the military’s official reports, although from time to time, as Caputo ironically remarks, “[t]he shattering or fragmenting effect of high explosive occasionally caused semantic difficulties in reporting injuries of men who

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had undergone extreme mutilation.” (168) The language is set in stark contrast to both the language of the men in the field and to Philip’s romantic, hyperbolic metaphors. While Philip has to use the sanitized military language in his reports, Caputo refuses to use this kind of language, describing the dead, their odors and looks as concretely and exactly as possible: “[One soldier], hit in the midsection, had been turned inside out, the slick, blue and greenish brown mass of his intestines bulging out of him.” (163-164) Thus, Caputo regains the integrity he feels he has compromised during his duty as assistant staff officer, and again confirms his autobiography’s purpose as a truthful chronicle of experiences and events. (xx-xxi)

On his first day, Philip already experiences the horrible absurdities of his job, when he is ordered to display four decomposing, heavily mutilated bodies of Vietcong fighters to the clerks because the colonel wants them to get “used to the sight of blood.” (164) Then, just as the bodies are taken to their burial, Philip is ordered to retrieve them and to present them again, this time to the visiting general. “I returned to the tent, where, in the spirit of the madness in which I was taking part, I made up a new title for myself. I wrote it on a piece of cardboard and tacked the cardboard to my desk. It read: 2LT. P. J. CAPUTO. OFFICER IN CHARGE OF THE DEAD.” (166) Thus, he establishes his new identity by writing it down. Similarly, he constructs and establishes his post-war identity by the act of writing the autobiography.

The first fundamental doubts concerning the morality of the war and the American involvement in Vietnam arise when Philip encounters a chaplain who demands an explanation from him of “what we are doing here.” (169) Philip is not able to answer this question and takes refuge in the military propaganda of his daily reports. Later on trying to find a meaningful answer for himself, Philip notes that he can find none, he “can only record the death of some old personal truths.” (Myers 96) He cannot reconcile the teachings of his Catholic upbringing with the demands of his job: “I still believed in the cause for which we were supposed to be fighting, but what kind of men were we, and what kind of army was it that made exhibitions of the human beings it had butchered?” (173) The emotional and psychological strains of his job, the constant contact with death and destruction, lead to the feeling that he is old beyond his years: “I was twenty-four when the summer began; by the time it ended, I was much older than I am now. Chronologically, my age had

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advanced three months, emotionally about three decades. I was somewhere in my middle fifties, that depressing period when a man's friends begin dying off and each death reminds him of the nearness of his own." (182) Here, the experiencing I for the first time feels what the narrating I has already presented as typical for Vietnam soldiers in the "Prologue": The slipping away of time, the feeling of one's own personality changing rapidly. (xv)

The dead he is in charge of begin to charge at him, he suffers from nightmarish visions of deceased soldiers. He feels as if he is split up in two parts:

Half of me was in the mess, listening to two officers talking of practical military matters, of axes of advance and landing zones, and the other half was on the dream drill field where legless, armless, eyeless men marched to my commands. Then they vanished. Suddenly. I saw them and then I did not see them. In their place, I saw Mora and Harrison prefigured in death. I saw their living faces across from me and, superimposed on those, a vision of their faces as they would look in death. It was a kind of double exposure. (190)

This double exposure is mirrored in the narrative technique Caputo uses. By placing the voices of both the narrating I and the experiencing I next to each other, the reader gets a kind of double image of the war. The prefiguration of death in living men is mirrored in the way Caputo presents many of his characters: when they are first introduced in the narration, Caputo mentions at the same time that they are already dead. Thus double vision is forced upon the reader, the image of the dead person superimposed on the image of the living person in the narrative. "The end of the story is everywhere implicit in its beginning," (Bates, *Wars* 234) and death is omnipresent.

Philip begins to despise himself because of his complicity in the de-individualization of the individual death. He also feels guilty, living in the relative safety of the rear while his comrades risk their lives. Nevertheless, he feels that he is in danger of becoming another casualty of war: "We had survived, but in war, a man does not have to be killed or wounded to become a casualty. His life, his sight, or limbs are not the only things he stands to lose." (196) He volunteers for a line unit out of a feeling of hate for the statistics, boredom, and the desire to take revenge for all the deaths on the Vietnamese. (219)

The Killing and Court Martial

Also lost also is Philip's former fear of dying. No longer feeling "invincible," (234) he just does not care anymore if he lives or dies. "Certainly I had no illusions that my death, if it came, would be a sacrifice." (235) In line with the construction Caputo favors in his "Prologue" of the soldiers as Christ-like figures sacrificed on a Vietnamese Golgotha who nevertheless cannot redeem anyone or anything, Philip feels that his death could not change anything. He sees himself reduced to "insectlike pettiness [...]. I was a beetle. We were all beetles, scratching for survival in the wilderness. [...] My death would not alter a thing." (242)

Philip's main moral crisis occurs a short time after the destruction of Na Ha. Philip, strongly desiring to "retaliate" for everything he and his unit had endured, orders a squad to capture two Vietcong suspects from a village that is off-limits to the Americans, excited by the idea that he will take "independent action." (300) He harbors the secret wish that both Vietcong will get killed in the process: "I almost laughed out loud at the idea of their deaths." (299) Although he did not order the killing explicitly, the soldiers he sent to capture the Vietnamese return with their corpses. "In my heart, I hoped Allen would find some excuse for killing them, and Allen had read my heart." (300) In the tight-knit community of combat soldiers, mutual understanding does not depend on words. But the soldiers have killed the wrong men: Philip recognizes one of the victims to be a young boy who had worked for the Americans as an informant. He is deeply shocked at his own deed: "My God, what have we done. Please God, forgive us. What have we done?" (304) Philip is charged with murder and court-martialed. Although he feels responsible for the death of the young man on the one hand, on the other hand he cannot conceive of the killing as premeditated murder. Caputo constructs himself as the lamb to be slaughtered for the common good conscience of the Corps and America:

The deaths of Le Dung and Le Du could not be divorced from the nature and conduct of the war. They were an inevitable product of the war. As I had come to see it, America could not intervene in a people's war without killing some of the people. But to raise those points [...] would be to raise a host of ambiguous moral questions. It could even raise the question of the morality of American intervention in Vietnam [...]. Therefore, the five men in the patrol and I were to be tried as common criminals [...]. If we were found guilty, the Marine Corps' institutional conscience would be clear. Six criminals, who, of course, did not represent the majority of America's fine fighting sons, had been brought to

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justice. Case closed. If we were found innocent, the Marine Corps could say, "Justice has taken its course, and in a court-martial conducted according to the facts and the rules of evidence, no crime was found to have been committed."

Case closed again. Either way, the military won. (306)

Caputo's bitter comment accuses the military of washing their hands of the killings while he is condemned for something that was not only in keeping with the war of extermination against the VC his superiors had demanded, but that was inescapably inherent in the very nature of the war. Myers states that he "argues as well for understanding of the relationship between individual moral failure and the unique historical circumstances of the war." (102) Philip is turned into a scapegoat for the "fine fighting sons" of America, carrying the guilt of all soldiers fighting in Vietnam. America is thus able to continue her "convenient national amnesia." (Myers 102) The main question of the autobiography, "How could I, and other patriotic, law-abiding and even religious young Americans like me, be brought to murder innocent people in Vietnam?" (Bates, *Wars* 235) is answered with reference to the extraordinary and morally corrupting circumstances: "The thing we had done was a result of what the war had done to us." (309) Not acting but reacting, Caputo presents himself as victim of the war as well as of the military and American society at large. Explicitly exculpating himself and at the same time accusing the court-martial of being set up solely to hide the truth as he knows it, he concludes: "The truth was [...]: the war in general and the U.S. military policies in particular were ultimately to blame for the deaths of Le Du and Le Dung. That was the truth and it was that truth which the whole proceeding was designed to conceal." (313) Caputo begins to find his new role: that of the guardian of the truth who fights illusions and reveals the true meaning of things. Being a veteran he belongs to the only group that is able to speak "passionately, truthfully, finally" (Styron 5); and he is willing to do so. When the charges against him are eventually dropped, Caputo considers his acquittal as a consequence of ideology and self-deceit of the military: "It would prove what the others wanted to believe: that we were virtuous American youths, incapable of the act we had been accused. And if we were incapable of it, then they were too, which is what they wanted to believe themselves." (317) Thus, the verdict of the court strengthens his identity construction as "a casualty of the war, a moral casualty [...]" (320)

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After the court martial, Philip makes his separate peace with the Vietcong. “The war simply wasn’t my show any longer. I had declared a truce between me and the Viet Cong, signed a personal armistice, and all I asked for now was a chance to live for myself on my own terms.” (315) When he leaves Vietnam, his conclusion is: “None of us was a hero. [...] We had survived, and that was our only victory.” (320)

Return to Vietnam

In an “Epilogue” to his autobiography, Caputo describes his return to Vietnam as a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* to see the end of the war. “It soon became clear that even ten years had not been long enough to break the emotional embrace in which the war held me. I *had* to go back, whatever the risks. [...] It just seemed I had a personal responsibility to be there at the end.” (323) His role now is that of a witness. The ambivalent feelings of his tour of duty surface again: “[...] I wanted to see it end. At the same time, a part of me did not want to see it end in a North Vietnamese victory.” (325) The impending North Vietnamese victory leads him to conclude his personal war experience: “Those men [his fellow soldiers, PF] had died for no reason. They had given their all for nothing.” (325) The sufferings and deaths of himself and his fellow soldiers are insignificant. Having arrived at this conclusion he is finally able to note the official surrender of the Saigon government to the North Vietnamese calmly: “We took the news quietly. It was over.” (328) Caputo leaves Vietnam with a ship with troops from the Ninth Marine Expeditionary Brigade, the same unit he arrived with in Vietnam at the beginning of the war. Beidler comments: “Caputo’s design of sense-making has come full circle, a book imagined in its own brilliantly ironic final figure.” (*American Literature* 158)

Incursion: The Movie *A Rumor of War*

Three years after the appearance of Caputo's autobiography *A Rumor of War* the book was made into a TV film with the same title, starring Brad Davis as Philip Caputo. It was the first major TV film set in Vietnam.

The film took some liberties with the book. The plot follows that of the book only roughly and leaves out many details. Also, the characters are simplified. Some characters' names differ from those in the book for no obvious reason. For example, platoon sergeant William "Wild Bill" Campbell is re-christened 'Sergeant Coleman' in the film. While Caputo's narrative paints a complex picture of the sergeant, the character in the film is reduced to the stereotypical tough platoon leader with the golden heart. Also, Caputo's character is less multi-faceted than in the book. His complex motives to join the Marines are reduced to the notion of becoming a 'man' by serving in a war. The film emphasizes mainly Caputo's gradual disillusionment with the war and his own role in it, and the loss of his idealistic notions of heroism and manliness through the confrontation with the realities of warfare in Vietnam.

Furthermore, the movie deviates from the chronological plot of the book. It begins with Caputo's interrogation after the death of the Vietnamese civilians, then proceeds with the story from the beginning, and finally repeats the interrogation scene at the end of the film. Thus, the scene serves as a kind of frame narration. Aside from the creation of suspense, the cyclical plot also presents the Vietnam war as a world of its own, similar to Caputo's narrative which describes Vietnam in contrast to America as an "ethical as well as a geographical wilderness." ("Prologue" xx)

The mode of presentation changes between showing and telling: dialogic passages alternate with narrative parts. The film recreates the repetitiousness of walking through the thick, nearly impenetrable jungle day in and day out by underlaying the pictures of the walking troops with a narrative voice which repeats the same text again and again. The hand-held camera 'walks' with the soldiers; it imitates the

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perspective of a member of the platoon. Thus, this technique creates a highly subjective and immediate impression of the events.

The film uses voice-on and voice-over. Although, as Chapman comments, a “narrating voice-over of any sort is unfashionable, but especially one that moralizes, or interprets“ (247), this mode of comment is fitting to represent the different voices of the narrating I and the experiencing I in the book: The voice-over, representing the older Caputo, constantly comments on the feelings and thoughts of his younger self. The voice-on is young Caputo’s voice, contrasted with the comments of the voice-over. The comments of the voice-over as well as the initial scene of Caputo being accused of murder create an ironic comment on the young, naive, enthusiastic, gung-ho marine. As Caputo gets more and more disillusioned, the distance between voice-over and voice-on is reduced, similar to the slow convergence of experiencing and narrating I in the book. Finally, the voice-over presents Caputo’s thoughts and feelings on his interrogation as interior monologue.

In line with Caputo’s “Preface” in the narrative, the film is not intended to display the strategy, power, or politics of the Vietnam war but focuses on the personal experiences of Caputo, his perceptions and development. By using filmic means like voice-over and voice-on, the hand-held camera, as well as repetition of scenes the TV version of *A Rumor of War* manages effectively to recreate the the narrative’s different voices and to visualize the decisive experiences in Vietnam.

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IV. AN ENDLESS HORROR SHOW OF DEATH AND MUTILATION – Autobiographies by Female Soldiers

IV.1. EXORCISING VIETNAM - Lynda Van Devanter: *Home Before Morning: The True Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (1983)

Biographical Sketch

Lynda Van Devanter was born and raised in Arlington, Virginia. She grew up in a politically conservative, Catholic family. After attending nursing school at Mercy Hospital in Baltimore, she enlisted in the Army Nurse Corps in October 1968. She volunteered for service in Vietnam and served as an Army nurse from June 8, 1969 to June 7, 1970 with the 71st Evacuation Hospital and with the 67th Evacuation Hospital. After her return to the States she was deeply affected by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder caused by her experiences in Vietnam. By chance, she got involved with the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) and founded the women's branch of the VVA, which she headed as National Women's Director. In 1983 her autobiography *Home Before Morning* appeared. It reached a wide audience and encouraged many female veterans to deal with their own wartime memories. Thus, it was an important step toward the public recognition of women veterans and their specific experiences and problems. The reviewer from *Kirkus Reviews* emphasizes Van Devanter's work for the "oft-ignored female Vietnam vets." *Ms. Magazine* calls the autobiography "a healing book." Among the former nurses, its appearance sparked a heated debate. Some nurses stated "she exaggerated and distorted conditions to bolster her antimilitary political views. [...]" Van Devanter was accused of "fictionalizing" the work load and of depicting the nurses as "a bunch of bed-hopping, foul-mouthed tramps." Other nurses substantiated Van Devanter's descriptions. Both sides accused the other to exploit Vietnam to support their respective political views. In any case, "[f]or the public who long ignored Vietnam, Van Devanter's experiences were shocking but important revelations." (MacPherson, *Long Time Passing* 444-445)

Lynda Van Devanter emphasizes the special role of Vietnam veterans for American society which derives from the Vietnam experiences: "We have strength inside us that other people don't even know about. As we begin to get better and get back

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into the world, we make this world a better place.” (O'Connor)²⁴⁷ Van Devanter lectured at universities, high schools and public forums of all kinds, and wrote for numerous magazines and newspapers. During the Gulf War, she also co-edited with Joan A. Furley a collection of writings by female Vietnam veterans, called *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*. Van Devanter today suffers from illnesses which are probably due to her exposure to poisonous chemical substances during the war. Her daughter was born with heart and intestinal defects which are possibly connected to Van Devanter's contact with chemicals in Vietnam (“Afterword” 322)²⁴⁸ Despite her several serious illnesses, Van Devanter is still active attending writers' workshops and lecturing on her experiences, and lobbying for female veterans' rights.²⁴⁹

Home Before Morning

The Narrative

Van Devanter²⁵⁰ describes in 22 chapters, plus a “Foreword” and an “Epilogue” – and in the new edition an additional “Afterword, 2001” – the time from her early childhood to her return to Vietnam as part of a veterans' delegation in 1982. Most chapters deal with her experience in Vietnam. She also provides a glossary of medical terms and Vietnam jargon. (377-382) Van Devanter inserts letters and transcripts of recordings from her parents into her narrative to assert the authenticity of the story. They can be regarded as “Wirklichkeitssignale” (Kosellek 285) in the text. These letters and the views expressed in them also serve to illustrate the distance between the world at home and Vietnam: while the reader follows the youthful experiencing I through the process from innocence to experience and disillusionment, the letters convey the unchanged view of those whose lives are not affected by the existential experience of war. Thus, they provide a comment on Lynda's situation and experiences and produces irony through contrast. They are thus a means of direction of sympathies and of enhancing the identification of the reader with the experiencing I.

²⁴⁷ See also Nicosia 618.

²⁴⁸ The autobiography's new “Afterword” in the edition from 2001 will be quoted as “Afterword.”

²⁴⁹ For a comprehensive account of her life and work see Hillstrom/Hillstrom, 2: 413-420 as well as the “Afterword”.

²⁵⁰ To be able to distinguish between the younger and the older self, I will call the experiencing self ‘Lynda’ and the narrating ‘I’ ‘Van Devanter.’

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Van Devanter dedicates her book “To Lieutenant Sharon A. Lane And All of The Unknown Women Who Served Forgotten In Their Wars.” She thus introduces her book as a memorial and as a tribute for the women who died in Vietnam²⁵¹ as well as for all women who served and whose fate is not part of that war's public perception. At the end of her narrative she returns to the subject of women and war:

Although most of the women who served in Vietnam were not standing in the boonies shooting someone's head off, we were close by, trying desperately to put that head back together again. And we weren't there in only medical capacities. [...] Yet even to talk about women in Vietnam is not the whole story. [...] In all of our wars, women have been killed, maimed, disabled, and psychologically injured. They deserve at least a thank you from their country. (357-358)

Van Devanter's autobiography works according to generic standards. It has “the polish one expects in published war stories. [It begins] in medias res, then proceed[s] more or less chronologically through the narrator's career. [It incorporates] other discursive forms, such as dreams and letters, for variety and ironic effect. When the narrative is episodic in structure, the episodes are set off from one another typographically.” (Bates, *War* 169) *Home Before Morning* shares these characteristics not only with Smith's and Hampton's autobiographies, but also with writings by male veterans like Ron Kovic, Robert Mason, or W.D Ehrhart.

The first chapter is taken out of the chronologically narrated plot. It presents a proleptic view of Lynda's problems after the war and her flashbacks of Vietnam. This chapter is set apart by the use of narrative present. In this “self-narrated monologue” the experiencing I and narrating I merge: “the narrator identifies with his past self, giving up his temporally distanced vantage point and cognitive privilege for his past time-bound bewilderment and vacillations.” (Cohn, 166) The chapter contains dreams about Vietnam and unresolved questions Lynda puts before herself as well as reflections about her present situation. Cohn argues that this self-narrated monologue can be especially important in a text “when a highly self-centered narrator relates and existential crisis that has remained unresolved. Unable to cast a retrospective light on past experience, he can only relive his dark confusions, perhaps in the hope of

²⁵¹ Sharon A. Lane, who worked at the 312th Evacuation Hospital in Chu Lai, died on the morning of June 8, 1969 in a rocket attack on the hospital. See Bigler's biography of Lane and chapter II.2.2 of this study.

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ridding himself of them.” (*Transparent Minds* 168) Moreover, the present tense is the narrative tense of traumatic events. Shay states that “[...] severe trauma destroys the capacity to think a future or past. [The survivor’s] experience is ineffable in a language that insists on ‘was’ and ‘will be.’ The trauma world knows only *is*.” (190-191) Thus, Van Devanter presents herself as deeply affected by her Vietnam experiences even more than ten years after the war. The chapter title, “Just Another Warm Summer Night” (1) reinforce the impression that the traumatic Vietnam memories are ever-present in her life. Her memories condemn her to her own “personal hell.” (3) They are incommunicable at the core: “Occasionally, the words work. But it’s on nights like this that [the other Vietnam veterans] and I must face the realization that we are alone, that ours is a solitary pain, to be felt in hundreds of 3 a.m.s [...]. There was a time when I didn’t understand that, when I didn’t know how alone I was, how alone we all were.” (3) Her memories not only separate her from the non-veterans around her who did not listen to her war stories (3), but also from her fellow veterans.

Like flashbacks suddenly appearing in Lynda’s memory, Van Devanter integrates four italicized short paragraphs in the narrative that highlight one particular event in Vietnam. They introduce some of the topics central to her Vietnam experience: the problem that the nurses had to make life-and-death decisions concerning which soldier to operate on and which one to be left to die (2); the horror of Vietnamese children mutilated (2-3) and already wounded in utero (4); and the young American soldiers who were mortally wounded and dying (6). The first chapter also introduces her Vietnam experience as ambivalent: her tour of duty was not only horrible, but also “the most important and the most intense” (3) time of her life. The flashbacks grow into a dream about Vietnam. (6-12) Both places, Virginia and Vietnam, are connected through the time – it is 3 o’clock in the morning - and the climate - it is as hot in Virginia as it was in Vietnam. In contrast to the flashbacks, the dream is not set apart visually. The visual integration of the dream in the narrative can be regarded as signifying the continuing presence of her Vietnam memories in her post-war life.

Writing

Writing, even writing on a subject other than the war, involuntary releases her closed-in memories of Vietnam: "[...] each time I sat at the typewriter, I found myself writing about Vietnam, almost against my will. It's over, I kept saying. Vietnam is over! I threw the pages away and forced myself to write about dialysis. Yet Vietnam always ended up on the paper and in my conscious thoughts." (338) She soon begins deliberately to write about Vietnam "as a form of therapy [...]. I was hoping somehow to exorcise the Vietnam war from my mind and heart." (ix) She compares the Vietnam war's aftermath in her life to "cancer" (x), a life-threatening illness without obvious causes, and experiences her therapy as "rebirth" (x).²⁵² The odd mixture of religious, therapeutic and clinical metaphors may be the result of three major influences in her life: her upbringing as a Catholic, her professional environment as nurse and as a student of psychology, as well as her "Walk through Vietnam" (350) with her therapist. The imagery of coming to terms with the Vietnam experience as redeeming a "ghost" (350) and healing "cancer" is significant for her own interpretation of the war and her role in it: She compares the war to a outer evil force which affects a person arbitrarily and without obvious reasons. A demoniac is regarded as innocent by the Catholic church; neither does the demon choose the person because he has become guilty, nor can the person be regarded as guilty of what the demon does that possesses him.²⁵³ Cancer appears without being definitely connected to a certain conduct and can befall anyone. Both metaphors imply that the pain which has "haunted" (350) her for more than ten years after her return from the war does not result from her having become guilty; rather, she is suffering innocently from the attack of an evil, even superhuman force. Thus, from the beginning of her narrative she presents herself as a victim. In contrast to O'Brien, who reflects on his

²⁵² The metaphor of „rebirth“ is exemplified in Lynda's experience during a holiday when she dives through a tunnel and suddenly fears that she will not be able to reach its end and will certainly drown. Finally she manages to reach the end of the tunnel. "When I realized I was alive, something inside of me told me that if I could get through that tunnel, I could do anything." (327) This episode can be interpreted as a metaphor for her life: as she moves forward from one sunny, warm, and pleasant pool through the dark, desperate, dangerous tunnel only to emerge in a similar warm, safe and pleasant pool, she has to go from her carefree youth through the horrors of Vietnam and the depressions afterwards to become once again a person who is secure in herself and who stands on the sunny side of life. Bill's comment at the end of this episode foreshadows the positive outcome of Lynda's life story, but also emphasizes the dangers along the way: "I was afraid you weren't going to make it." (328)

²⁵³ See Mk. 5. 1-20, and Petersdorff, 1: 268-273, 2: 288-289.

own complicity in the war he sees as wrong and even evil (98), Van Devanter unambiguously counts herself among the victims of the Vietnam war.

The healing of cancer as well as an exorcism are both long and often painful processes with uncertain results. Similarly, her therapy proves to be difficult and sometimes painful, but nevertheless finally positive. Therapy provided a “structured process for understanding the most difficult experience” (350) of Lynda’s life. Van Devanter is finally able to communicate her experiences in the form of her autobiography with the help of a professional writer. (Bates, *Wars* 169) Kali Tal argues that trauma survivors “mythologize” their experiences: “Mythologization works by reducing the traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives (twice- and thrice-told tales that come to represent ‘the story’ of the trauma” turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative.” (6)²⁵⁴ The act of narrating helps Van Devanter to “own” (ix, and 359) the war experience, to take possession of her own personal history and memories. Gaps in her long-repressed memories from Vietnam (ix-x) are not reflected in the narration. In contrast to Caputo, who translates his memory gaps into an aesthetical means to represent his war experience more authentically, Van Devanter denies them in her narration. Narrating her life-story enables her to construct a narrative which “masks the disruptions of identity” resulting from the traumatic experience and “memory’s limitations.” (Eakin, *Lives Become Stories* 93)

²⁵⁴ The process of „mythologization“ is visible in the different versions of the story of the „young bleeder,“ the patient who died on Lynda’s operating table and who’s memory haunted her for the years afterwards. There are three different versions of this story: the first in *Home Before Morning*, the second in an article in *NamNews* by Van Devanter from 1987 and the third in an article in the *Nam Vet Newsletter* by Myra MacPherson from January 1990, where Mcpherson relates an occasion when Van Devanter told this episode to an audience. All three sources offer nearly verbatim the same account of the events, nevertheless, the autobiography of course contains the most detailed account of the story. MacPherson describes Van Devanter’s “performance” of the story which has become artificial: “Van Devanter tells her story with the flair of an actress now. Since 1980, when she became a national VA spokeswoman for Vietnam women veterans, Van Devanter has told it on television shows and in Congressional hearing and for journalists. To those who have heard it often, there is a staginess to the tremble, the tears, the melodramatic catch in her voice. [...] Another memory, so a part of Van Devanter that it is told by rote, in present tense, is the death of one young man.” 62.

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Especially the respect of the therapist Shad Meshad, a Vietnam veteran himself,²⁵⁵ and the assurance that the nurses' "job was overwhelming, [...] but we nurses triumphed. And most importantly, we saved the lives of people who might otherwise have died. 'You were my heroes,' Shad said" helped Lynda to "believe in myself." (351) Van Devanter's penultimate chapter is also called "You were my heroes." (353-359) In this chapter Van Devanter inserts nine excerpts from letters by female veterans who wrote to her about their own war experiences in response to interviews and articles. She thus transmits the respect paid to her and all nurses to the other female veterans of Vietnam and assures them of high estimate. As the therapist's statement of respect and admiration has helped her, she tries to help other female and male veterans to "know that they are not alone, and that they, too, can find the way back home." (ix) The writing of her autobiography is not only personal therapy for herself, but also a offer of respect and an example for other veterans.

Cultural Background

Brought up in a tightly-knit Catholic, politically conservative family, Lynda grows up with the notion that everyone has an obligation to be "of service not only to our family, community, church and country, but to all of mankind." (21) Motivated by this notion, patriotism, and an inclination to caring for others, she decides to make nursing her career. Her decision to enlist in the Army Nurse Corps is supported by factors determined by her upbringing and background: her patriotism, the opportunity to fulfill her obligations to mankind as her parents have taught her, (23) the possibility of having a career unusual for a woman at that time, and the fulfillment of her father's secret wishes - he had tried to enlist in the military during the Second World War but was rejected. (20) As many Americans, Lynda and her family are "carried away" (23) by John F. Kennedy's "inspirational" (24) inaugural address in January 1961.²⁵⁶ In hindsight, Van Devanter distances herself from her "naive" (47) younger self:

At that time, none of us realized that there were American military advisors in a small country ten thousand miles away, a country where the French had

²⁵⁵ Shad Meshad is one of the preeminent researchers of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and a long-time lobbyist for veterans' rights. Meshad served in Vietnam as a psychologist. He has written an autobiography about his experiences, called *Officer for Dark Mornings*. See Nicosia ???

²⁵⁶ See for example Caputo, *Rumor* xiv.

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fought a colonial war during the fifties. That war had bitterly divided all Frenchmen. Yet, we couldn't see that the experience of the French was but a preview of what faced the United States; that decisions made by this new President and his successors would lead to the deaths of thousands of Americans in a land that most of us, in 1961, couldn't even locate on a map. As John Kennedy spoke, we never even thought about Vietnam. We only thought about how inspirational he was and how he would lead us into a new era. (24)

Although Van Devanter blames Kennedy and his successors for being responsible for the senseless deaths of thousands of Americans, she also assigns responsibility for the war to herself and her fellow Americans. In contrast to her younger self who was not able to learn the lessons of history, Van Devanter now wants to explicitly remember and pass on her war experiences because "if I forget entirely, I may be passively willing to see it happen again." (ix)

Lynda requests orders for Vietnam out of a patriotic wish to help "our boys": [...] if [they] were blown apart, then somebody better be over there putting them back together again. I started to think that maybe that someone should be me." (47) Her friend Barbara assures her, herself believing the recruiter, that "nurses don't get killed." (47) This statement provides an ironic counterpoint to the autobiography's dedication to the one nurse killed in an enemy attack in a hospital in Vietnam.

The War Experiences

The first Vietnam chapter, "New Blood" (81) begins with a brief account of the death of Sharon Lane, who was killed on June 8, 1969, on the same day when Lynda arrived in Vietnam. The chapter title also points to a new and different phase of Lynda's life. By inserting the description of Lane's death at the beginning of the Vietnam chapters, Van Devanter constructs a possible parallel between Sharon Lane's and her own destiny in Vietnam. She thus underlines that even supposedly non-combatant medical personnel was not spatially distanced from the war, which had no clear-cut front and consequently no safe rear.²⁵⁷ Already during her plane's descent into Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport she is exposed to enemy fire. "In a single moment, every idealistic thought I had ever had was gone. To hell with 'Ask not...' and all those other high-sounding phrases. There were people on the ground

²⁵⁷ See chapter II.2.2. of this study.

who were trying to kill us. I'd had enough of this grand adventure. [...] There [...] was a cold, hard realization: I could die here." (83) Her patriotic and romantic notions are reduced to mere "phrases" in a single moment. Moreover, the hospital she is assigned to is frequently shot at by night. Again, she realizes: "*I could have died.*" (101, italics in original) She describes her situation as being in combat and thus, in this respect not essentially different from that of the male soldiers.

The next chapter, titled "Mass-Cal" begins with a multivocal chaotic chorus of unconnected voices of unidentified medical personnel who are in the process of receiving wounded soldiers. (105-106) Van Devanter uses the technique of showing, the immediate scenic presentation of the events. The sentences are short, conveying a sense of urgency and building up tension. The reader, as Lynda, has to make sense of what happens. Lynda is unprepared for the horrors she encounters in the mass-casualty situation and the "sheer number of mutilated young bodies that the helicopters kept bringing." (106) The black humor of the other medical personnel, who call burn cases "crispy critters," (112)²⁵⁸ as well as the seemingly brutal, matter-of-fact way of dealing with human remains and severed limbs – she is told to "throw" a torn-off foot "in the trash" (107) – indicates the survival strategies of the seasoned medical personnel. Language serves as a means to distance themselves from the horrible events and sights, which is a precondition for the soldiers' psychological survival.²⁵⁹ A surgeon advises her to "tell yourself they're not people you're working on, but merely bodies." (112) While in civilian circumstances compassion and sympathy are highly valued in the medical professions, in a war zone they are deemed dangerous for the mental and emotional survival of the medical personnel. Vietnam is presented as a world in which normal values no longer exist, or have even become dangerous. There is no time for decency or even mourning. Instead, cynicism, emotional distancing and numbing provide the key to endurance. Not only the patients are victims of war, but also the medical personnel's ability to have normal human emotions.

²⁵⁸ Crispy Critters, as Beidler explains, „turned out to be a theft from commercials for a children's breakfast cereal, crackling and sugar-coated, especially popular with the Saturday-morning TV crowd.“ *American Literature* 23.

²⁵⁹ Similarly, Myers argues that the bonding of men in the field is counterbalanced by distancing strategies. (1)

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Lynda soon learns the peculiarities of nursing in Vietnam: she has to take responsibility for tasks that are performed exclusively by doctors in stateside hospitals. (91-92) Her professional skills are enhanced and she is aware of the importance of her work (161). At the same time, she learns to know the toll the constant exposure to death and mutilation takes. She has to numb herself emotionally to be able to function properly, even to the point that she is no longer able to shed tears. But to get rid of this basic human expression of grief is seen not as a loss but as a gain: "Somehow, when you reached that point, it became easier. If you can't feel, you can't be hurt. If you can't be hurt, you'll survive." (167) Further, extensive partying, alcohol and marihuana provide means to distance herself from the war. Lynda also feels herself growing old beyond her years. The war, severed from normality, has its own measure of time: "We were living by a different clock in Pleiku and learning that chronological age has little correlation with how old some people feel. Holding the hand of one dying boy could age a person ten years. Holding dozens of hands could thrust a person past senility in a matter of weeks." (166) The feeling of premature aging and even of having outlived her life is shared by many Vietnam soldiers, men and women alike. Caputo describes his feelings: "I came home with the curious feeling that I had grown older than my father, who was then fifty-one." (*Rumor* 4)

The experience of combat nursing also leads to the loss of her former values and her patriotic notions. At the beginning of her tour, Lynda adheres to the values which had brought her to Vietnam. She calls the war "a noble cause to preserve democracy" and advises her fellow soldiers to "be proud of our country [...] and proud of our flag." (95) The pride in her country is enhanced by the moon landing. (126-127) She also asks her parents to "[d]isplay the flag, Mom and Dad, please, every day" (127) to defy the anti-war demonstrators. And she concludes: "No, nobody can tell me we don't belong here." (128) Her patriotism is countered by one of the surgeons' disillusioned view of the war: "I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation." (96)

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Lynda's patriotism slowly dissolves due to the working and living conditions and to the massive numbers of casualties. She surprises herself with her "slowly evolving dislike for our own government," (183) and even takes part in an anti-war fast on Thanksgiving. (184) Her father, in contrast, is still loyal to 'my country, right or wrong': "Maybe Nixon's wrong in a lot of things, but nonetheless, he's my president and I'm going to support him." (187) Far from being the identification figure for his warrior dreams that her father had imagined her to be – "[...] I'm so pleased that you're in the Army. I'm living vicariously now. You are me and I'm in." (129) – Lynda finally renounces the government and even openly protests against the war. Thus, she in a symbolic way also rejects her father's dreams, no longer being the obedient daughter who wants him to be proud of her.²⁶⁰ Finally, she openly voices her criticism of the war and her anger in her letters to her parents. (202-203)²⁶¹ But her father ignores her change and interprets her letters as expression of "battle fatigue" (209). He continues to emphasize his own patriotism and pride in what she does. (209) Van Devanter inserts numerous letters to and from her parents into this part of her narrative. In these letters, only the voice of the experiencing I is present. The letters reduce the distance to the reader, the supposedly unmediated and authentic presentation of the experiencing I's emotions lend credibility to Lynda's feelings.

Although Lynda is able to spatially distance herself spatially from the war, she is not able to distance herself psychologically. The war has become an integral part of herself: "Vietnam sucked so bad it could suck you back down out of the sky. It could suck you all the way back from the world. It was hopeless. You could DEROS, but you could never leave. It was in our very blood, eating away at us, and

²⁶⁰ For an analysis of the generational conflict see Lewis: *The Tainted War*, p. 45ff. Although he only takes into account narratives by male soldiers, many of his results are also applicable to autobiographies by female soldiers.

²⁶¹ She sarcastically comments in one of her letters on an amputation performed on Christmas Eve: "Merry Christmas, kid, we have to cut your leg off to save your life. [...] The war disgusts me. I hate it! [...] I'm sick of facing, every day, a new bunch of children ripped to pieces. They're just kids – eighteen, nineteen years old! It stinks! Whole lives ahead of them – cut off. I'm sick to death of it. I've got to get out of here." 202-203. From this time on, she no longer signs her letters 'Love, Lynda' but 'Peace, Lynda.' Lynda's letter is also to be found in Edelman's *Dear America*, p. 195-196. But while the name of the soldier who loses his leg is mentioned in the version of the letter printed in the autobiography, it is missing in Edelman's version. Edelman has not marked the omission in his reprint of the letter, so it is impossible to tell which version is corrupt and which is not.

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it would always be there.” (219)²⁶² This description is in line with her interpretation of Vietnam as “cancer,” (x) or an evil force she has to exorcise (ix). Nevertheless, the development of the experiencing I becomes clear: In contrast to her feeling that “you could never leave” Vietnam emotionally, after her therapy Lynda knows that she “can own” the war. (ix)

Vietnam and the Vietnamese

At her arrival, Lynda is introduced to the ambivalent, even contradicting realities of Vietnam by an older nurse:

The V.C. don't care whether you're a nurse, a clerk, or an infantryman [...]. All they know is that you're an American.” What made it worse, she told me, was that you couldn't distinguish between the V.C. and friendly Vietnamese. “Your hooch maid could be the one who's bringing the V.C. maps of your compound so they can try to kill you at night,” she said. “And if they don't succeed, she'll be back there the next morning, singing as she washes your clothes and shines your extra pair of boots. It's a crazy war. (90)

The war is presented as “crazy”, as a world where orientation is nearly impossible, friend and foe are indistinguishable. Thus, from the beginning the Vietnamese are presented as untrustworthy and false.

Lynda discovers a side in her she did not know before: the capability of hate and rage towards the enemy after a priest has been tortured and killed by the Vietcong:

Later that day I was assigned with Don Higham, a general surgeon, to work on a North Vietnamese colonel who had been captured the previous night. “I should cut this fucker's head off to even the score,” Don said. “We can hang it on the post at the front gate and laugh at all those bastards. After all, what goes around, comes around. Payback is a motherfucker.” Don was just venting his rage and would never have done anything so barbaric, but the thing that surprised me most was that I wanted him to follow through on his threat. In fact, I might have been glad to assist. (150-151)

She is surprised at her own reaction. Her notion of herself as a caring nurse is incompatible with her emotions. She is aware of the gap between the values she had adhered to before the war and her current moral standards which have deteriorated as a result of her experiences in Vietnam. Nevertheless, she literally takes revenge in her own hands when she prepares for an operation on a North Vietnamese

²⁶²“DEROS” is the abbreviation for “Date of expected return from overseas,” and in true American fashion was immediately transformed into a verb.

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officer: “[...] I spit in my hands. That was how I scrubbed for the case before donning sterile gloves. If he died of an infection, fuck him.” (157) By emphasizing that “thousands of Americans” display the same racism as she does, she depicts her behavior as common for a war zone.²⁶³ Although she justifies her indiscriminate hate for all Vietnamese by the fact that they are “the ones who kept killing American soldiers” (156), she nevertheless knows that she will “be ashamed” (157) afterwards. As Sara Ruddick argues, despite the fact that caregiving also entails the power to hurt and to neglect, the exercise of this power leads to the feeling of guilt and failure in the caregiver. (121)

In the “Epilogue” to her autobiography Lynda returns to Vietnam she describes her return to Vietnam in 1982 as part of a veterans’ delegation. Now the narrating I is able to explain the behavior of the narrating I and to attribute it to the war situation: “War destroys so many things, and one of the first to go is the ability to think of the enemy as human beings [...] You must depersonalize someone to kill him, and that is what the war had done to all of us.” (371) The distance between narrating I and experiencing I is obvious: Lynda, caught in the war situation, can not explain her feelings rationally; Van Devanter, more experienced and educated, is able to point out the reasons for her emotions. The “process of experience and education” distances both selves from each other. Nevertheless, Van Devanter does not reject her former self; instead, by emphasizing her development, she integrates her former self. (Stanzel 213) The Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister finally serves as the moral authority who takes away the feeling of guilt. He expresses “the belief they had that America’s Vietnam veterans were as much victims as they were. They had no love for the U.S. government, but they understood there was a difference between the warriors and the war.” (371-372) Thus, the American soldiers are even exculpated by their victims, forming a universal community of victims. Both sides identify the American government as the sole victimizer.²⁶⁴

The Military

Van Devanter presents herself from the beginning as distanced from the military. Truly “[t]his Man’s Army” (65), the women are nearly nonexistent in army

²⁶³ See also Smith 153 and chapter II.2.2. of the present study.

²⁶⁴ Smith describes her development in very similar terms; see 206, 351.

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language: "Although our company was divided about evenly between men and women, [...] the sergeants always referred to us as gentlemen. Some, who were not quite familiar with the finer points of the English language, even went so far as to call us 'gentlemens'." (65-68) As Bates comments, to become a soldier obviously meant to become a man, at least linguistically. (*Wars* 141)

Lynda harbors a feeling of superiority about the either bored or overzealous officers who instruct her class. She is not interested in the "mission of the Army" which seems to be unconnected to her own "mission of saving lives." (70)²⁶⁵ She clearly emphasizes the difference between the regular military and the medical personnel: while she is concerned about what she considers the really important issues, the military deals mainly with marginalia such as the correct marching formation or the correct chain of command. For her, only the medical part of basic training is important. Already at the beginning of her military life, she distances herself from the military and from normal military life. The juxtaposed "missions" – of the army and of herself – point toward the incompatibility of the priorities. Her attitude towards the military grows from indifference to criticism when she works at a psychiatric ward where soldiers just returned from Vietnam are treated: "They were given ninety days to straighten out or the Army would dump them in a VA [Veterans Administration, PF] facility." (73) The military is portrayed as an inhumane and uncaring organization that throws away the soldiers it has used for its purpose. Thus, her own philanthropic "mission" as well as her distance from the military is highlighted.

As the recruiter who tells her friend that "nurses don't get killed" (47), the basic training reinforces the impression that women will not be endangered in Vietnam. (72) As Mithers argues, the traditional categories assigned to women in the military were inapplicable for the situation in Vietnam and endangered female soldiers. (84) Van Devanter thus accuses the military to mislead the female soldiers and to expose them consciously to the danger of being killed.

²⁶⁵ Similarly, Smith presents herself from the beginning in a medical rather than in a military context and thus underlines her distance from the military. See chapter IV.2.

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Lynda accuses the military of interfering with patient care for ridiculous reasons. She feels harassed by the “lifers,” those men and women who made the army their career and were regarded to pester the enlisted personnel while cowardly hiding their own doubts about the war for their careers’ sake. Lynda makes it her “own personal crusade to attempt to eliminate the petty harassment that interfered with good patient care,” (212) even to the point that she has to request transfer to another unit to get away from her superior officers, “who were using their bureaucracy to harass me and any others who dared speak out against the system.” (213) The military thus is presented not only as uncaring but even as irresponsible toward its own soldiers. Lynda distances herself from the institution as well as from those soldiers who are the representatives of the institution. In contrast, she identifies herself with the casualties as well as with her fellow soldiers.²⁶⁶

As a female soldier, Lynda is subjected to the moral double standard of the Army.

If the guys want to go carousing to all hours of the night and screw ninety-seven prostitutes in a day, it was to be expected. “Boys will be boys.” Every PX stocked plenty of GI-issue condoms and according to grapevine some commanders even went so far as to bus in Vietnamese girls for hire to keep morale high. However, if we wanted to have a relationship, or to occasionally be with a man we cared deeply about, we were not conducting ourselves as “ladies” should. And if we might be unladylike enough to want birth control pills, [...] we could expect the wrath of God, or our commander, to descend upon us. (138)

“This man’s army” is depicted as only caring for the male soldiers. Lynda juxtaposes the simple sexual desire of the men with the relationship based on love the women desire. But even this is denied to the women who have to adhere to old-fashioned standards of behavior.

Near the end of her time in the Army, a colonel tries to convince her to reenlist. Lynda reacts angrily and tells her, “in no uncertain terms, where she could shove those reenlistment papers [...]” She feels nothing but disdain for the institution she has entered so eagerly before the war. “When I drove past the Pentagon, I gave it the finger.” (282)

²⁶⁶ Again, a similar episode can be found in Smith’s narrative. See chapter IV.2.

The Soldiers

The exposure to suffering and death enhances Lynda's need for a relationship. Although the common experiences provide a closeness and intimacy between Lynda and the surgeon Carl, these experiences at the same time separate them, "each lost in a world of our own" (116) and each trying to come to terms with their experiences on their own. The separation is overcome by the need for physical contact, "the only thing that makes any sense [is] holding tightly to whatever island of sanity we could find." (117) The personal history and social background of the other person become inconsequential since Vietnam is a world of its own where peacetime moral norms are no longer valid. (117) The narrating I explains the vital need for another person: "[...] all you want to do is lean against somebody and cry so they can hold you and love you and remind you that, after it's finished, you're still human." (118) The need for closeness "in a situation where there is nothing remotely resembling sanity around you," (117) derives from a need to assure oneself of one's humanity and sanity. But the other person seems to be important no so much as a person but rather as a coping device. Van Devanter changes from a first-person to a second-person narrator at this point. She thus universalizes her experiences and forms a bond with the reader. She becomes the person who makes sense out of the insanity of war for the reader, as Carl is the one who provides an anchor of sanity in the ocean of seemingly insane destruction around her. Consequently, Van Devanter comments: "Unfortunately, many people who haven't experienced that need don't understand." (118) Thus she emphasizes the veteran's privileged speaking position and underlining her role as a guide through the 'island of insanity' of Vietnam.

For Lynda, the death of one of her patients becomes the turning point for her development. The chapter "Hump Day" (193), referring to the day when the soldier is exactly in the middle of his or her tour of duty, contains the story of "the young bleeder." This day also becomes the final turning point for her in her attitude towards the war and the United States, and for her personal understanding of her role in the war. In the middle of the night Lynda is called to the OR to assist in a neurological case. The soldier is badly wounded and barely alive: "I thought I had gotten used to it all, but they [the combat casualties] kept getting worse. I didn't think I could handle this one." (194) Nevertheless, she begins working on him.

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Accidentally, she sees a snapshot of himself and his girlfriend. Suddenly he becomes a real person for her, not just another body:

I could see, in their faces, the love he felt for her, and she for him, a first love that had evolved from hours of walking together and talking about dreams, from passing notes to each other in history class, from riding together in his car with her sitting in the middle of the front seat so they could be closer. [...] This wasn't merely another casualty, another piece of meat to throw on the table and try to sew back together again. He had been real. *Gene*. Someone who had gone to the prom in 1968 with his girlfriend, *Katie*. He was a person who could love and think and plan and dream. Now he was lost to himself, to her, and to their future. (197-198)

The surgeons cannot save the soldier. For Lynda the death completes the change she has observed in herself for months: "I wouldn't cry, I told myself. I had to be tough. But I knew a profound change had already come over me. With the death of Gene, and with the deaths of so many others, I had lost an important part of myself. The Lynda I had known before the war was gone forever." (199) The war has severed Lynda from her former self as a young, carefree, all-American girl; she has lost her "innocence." (374)

Despite the feeling of being severed from her former self, Lynda feels that she has "survived" when her 'Freedom Bird' has left Vietnamese airspace: "We were the lucky ones. We had made it out alive." (243) By using the first person plural, she constructs a community of survivors, all experiencing and feeling the same: "But as soon as we realized we were safe, there was a vague uneasiness that came over us. We wondered what we would face back in the real world. Would it be the same as we had imagined? Would we be able to adjust? Would our friends and families still know us? Still love us? Or had we changed too much?" (243) They also experience survivor's guilt, feeling uneasy about leaving friends behind in danger. "Now that we were gone, who would look out for our friends?" (244) The Vietnam chapters thus end with a construction of a community which integrates and reconciles lifers, draftees, and volunteers, combatants and non-combatants, men and women of all ranks whose shared fate is their tour of duty in Vietnam.

Family

The alienation from her family that had begun in Vietnam continues after her return. Lynda feels unable to communicate to them. She also deeply offends her mother

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when she involuntarily asks her sister during dinner to “pass the fucking salt.” (256) The same or a similar story is often recounted by Vietnam veterans. Bates proposes two interpretations: On the one hand, the story makes fun of the veteran because he lapses into his Vietnam jargon. On the other hand, the story can be regarded as making fun of the family because the obscenity is “an affront to the social milieu of ‘please pass’; the storyteller and his or her audience, taking the side of the veteran, enjoy the family’s discomfort.” (*Wars* 225) The recounting of the story and Lynda’s ironic comment: “My mother almost had a coronary” (256) serve as a means to direct the readers’ sympathies. Nevertheless, in hindsight Van Devanter also shows understanding for her parents and acknowledges her own change: “It had to be tough on the two of them. They had said good-bye a year earlier to a happy-go-lucky all-American girl who thought she could grab the world by the tail. Now in that girl’s place they had a very sad and bitter young woman who did little but brood.” (261) She has grown up, changed from a girl to a woman, but in a way which makes her a completely different person. She feels no longer at home with her parents because “too much of me had changed.” (263)

Professional Relationships

After she has worked under wartime conditions, her stateside assignments turns out to be disappointing and unsatisfactory: “I had spent my time in Vietnam becoming technically competent and working in the capacity of a first assistant surgeon. At Walter Reed, I was treated as a totally inexperienced nurse with absolutely no say in the running of the OR. [...] I was told by the head nurse of the OR that I should not think that my experience in Vietnam meant much back in the States.” (266) Her professional skills gained at the expense of much of her emotional make-up are flatly rejected. Her wartime experiences are not regarded as valuable or important.

Due to her war-related depressions and flashbacks, Lynda is unable to work as an operating room nurse. (282) The work again and again triggers flashbacks from Vietnam. Finally, she loses her job, ironically because she is “too involved with the patients and [has] lost her objectivity.” (309)

War Stories

From the start of her narrative, Van Devanter describes Vietnam as different from earlier wars, and thus Vietnam war stories as different from the stories of earlier wars:

Mine were not nice, neat stories. There was love, but no cute little love stories; heroes, but no grand, heroic war stories; winners, but you had to look hard to tell them from the losers. On our battlefields, there were no knights in shining armor rescuing damsels in distress. The stories, even the funny ones, were dirty. They were rotten and they stank. The moments, good and bad, were permeated with the stench of death and napalm. (3-4)

This passage reflects the reinterpretation of the Vietnam war as “unique” (Beattie 7) and the subsequent assignment of veteran as the only authoritative speaker of the “truth” (Beattie 8) of the war experience. The war experience does not lend itself to mythic notions of heroism or even to clear-cut distinctions between winners and losers. Rather, it is ambivalent. Even the „nice“ stories and the positive experiences are soiled by „the stench of death and napalm.“

Before Lynda joins the war, she asks her boyfriend J.J., a Vietnam veteran just returned from his tour of duty, about his experiences. He advises her not to go “because it sucks.” (53) J.J. is either not willing or not able to relate his Vietnam experiences in greater detail, his quintessential “it sucks” contains for him all the information he considers necessary to know about the war. But Lynda, unfamiliar with the war, cannot decipher the meaning. The relationship between Lynda and J.J. is paralleled in the relation of the reader and Lynda. But Lynda, in contrast to J.J., this time the initiated one, explains to the ignorant reader what it means that “Vietnam sucks [...],” turning the colloquial expression into the description of the war as a nightmarish, vampire-like monster: “It sucks so bad that it can suck you back down from the sky. It sucks out your heart and your soul and your mind, and you can never get them back.” (373) This episode can be read as a meta-narrative comment on her own autobiographical project: because she ‘had been there’, she is now able to explain and make sense of the senseless war for the non-participants as well as for the other veterans. In contrast to the sullen and silent J.J. who obviously has neither come to terms with Vietnam nor is able to warn others effectively, Van Devanter can speak about the war eloquently.

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Lynda has to realize that her family is not interested in her actual war experiences when she tries to show “gory” slides of wounded soldiers in Pleiku. Her mother asks her to stop the showing and Lynda understands that “Vietnam would never be socially acceptable.” Although she tries to talk about her experience with different people, they do not want to listen to her gory story: “However, as soon as I got past the surface travelogue material, they would stop me, saying, ‘Oh my God, that’s too awful.’ They didn’t really want to know; they just wanted a summary in twenty-five words.” (264) The parents fail to provide the unjudgmental audience she needs. Only Lynda’s sister wants to see the pictures to understand what she has gone through. But Lynda, like J.J. more than a year before, only answers: “It sucked, Mary.” This time, though, it is not because she sees the experience as incommunicable but to protect her sister: “That’s all you need to know. The rest is too ugly.” She feels alienated from her family through her experiences, and, as Bates argues, at the same time also from the experiences themselves. (*Wars* 168) Consequently, Lynda finally decides to deny that she had served in Vietnam: She becomes a “closet vet.”

During her therapy, she comes out of the “closet” and begins to write about her war experiences. But her idea of writing a book about women’s Vietnam experiences is rejected by an editor: “Nobody wants to read that kind of book.” Also, when she tries to raise funds for the VVA’s women’s project she is rejected by most of the potential donors, even by feminist groups: “One of the foremost women’s groups in the country told me that women veterans were not enough of a cutting edge feminist issue.” Ironically enough, she got her first donation from the Playboy Foundation. As Bates argues, “veterans’ issues appeared insignificant to leaders of the women’s movement.” (*Wars* 168) As the editor’s statement shows, around the early Eighties women’s war stories were not yet part of the legacy of the Vietnam war.

American Society

The last six chapters open with a quote from Sir Walter Scott: “Soldier rest! thy warfare o’er / Sleep the sleep that knows not breaking, / Dream of battled fields no more, / Days of danger, nights of waking.” (245) This quote provides a ironic counterpoint to the problems and sleepless nights she describes during the final chapters and to which she already alluded in the first chapter. It seems to be an

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expression of how she imagines the feelings of the returning World War II veterans. She begins the chapter:

When the soldiers of World War II came home, they were met by brass bands, ticker-tape parades, and people so thankful for their service that even those who had never heard a shot fired in anger were treated with respect. It was a time when words like honor, glory, and duty held some value, a time when a returning GI was viewed with esteem so high it bordered on awe. To be a veteran was to be seen as a champion of democracy, an ideal against which all citizens could measure themselves. If you had answered your country's call, you were a hero. (245)

More fittingly to her homecoming, the chapter is titled: "Welcome Home Asshole!," thus providing what could be read as a brief summary of her experiences: "When I returned to my country in June of 1970, I began to learn a very bitter lesson. The values with which I had been raised had changed; in the eyes of most Americans, the military services had no more heroes, merely babykillers, misfits, and fools. I was certain that I was neither a babykiller nor a misfit. Maybe I was a fool." (245-245) She longs for the kind of celebratory homecoming and appreciation veterans from the Second World War had received. Although she has rejected her former ideals during her tour of duty and saw neither honor nor glory nor sense in the Vietnam war, she now wants to be acknowledged and celebrated for exactly these romantic ideals and patriotic sacrifices. Out of a desire to find a place for herself and to integrate herself into a tradition which helps construct a meaning out of the meaningless destruction in Vietnam she turns to the traditional notions about warfare and patriotism she grew up with.

Veterans

The only people she is really comfortable with are other veterans of the organization "Vietnam Veterans Against The War" (VVAW), which she wants to join for a protest march. But she is rejected even by the people she has built a common identity with in her imagination: "'You don't look like a vet,' he said. 'If we have women marching, Nixon and the network news might think we're swelling the ranks with nonvets.' 'But I can prove I was in Vietnam.' 'I believe you,' he said. 'But you can't be a member of our group.'" (271-272) Not even veterans' groups themselves are aware of the fact that women had served in Vietnam. After neither her private nor professional environment is understanding, supportive or at least

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interested, the only community left to her, the veterans community, turns out to be an all-male club which also rejects her.

Another veterans' group, the Vietnam Veterans of America, finally recognize her as a veteran and at the same time admit their own ignorance. "*Women veterans!* We forgot all about *women!* [...] The thought never crossed my mind." (341) In this veterans' community, Lynda for the first time feels unburdened:

When Bill returned to California, I began spending my days at the VVA headquarters in lower Manhattan, where I met dozens of other veterans – all men – who talked about the kinds of experiences that I had been having since my return from Vietnam. Suddenly, I didn't feel so alone anymore. These people were telling me that I could be proud of my service. The organization was trying to instill pride into all Vietnam vets. We had answered our country's call. It wasn't our fault that we were called for the wrong war. (341-342)

The VVA not only provides her with a sympathetic community, it also helps her to overcome her feeling of being a failure. As psychologist Shad Meshad argues, nurses in Vietnam "brought up to nurture and protect others, felt like failures because no matter what they did the GIs kept dying." (MacPherson, *Long Time Passing* 449) For Lynda, especially the impossibility to save Gene from dying haunts her. The veterans finally enable her to feel proud of her service by recognizing her crucial role in the survival of many soldiers. The only one to blame is the "country", the American government who called the soldier to serve in "the wrong war."

Reconciliation

Not only the veterans' community, but also therapy helps Lynda to slowly come to terms with her experiences. After some months of almost permanent depression, more and more days when she is unable to work, and rising alcohol consumption, she is asked to resign from her nursing job. This leads to a major breakdown, but also to the realization that she desperately needs help from a therapist. The therapy helps her to some extent, but she is still not getting at the cause of her problems: "[...] I couldn't tell my shrink that I was a Vietnam vet; I didn't want him to think that I was that crazy." (312) But despite these positive developments in her life, the emptiness keeps resurfacing, although she is now better able to keep it at bay. "But

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even during that most joyous of celebrations [her wedding to Bill, PF], I knew inside that the emptiness was never far away. It lurked in a dark corner of my soul. Waiting.” (324) She portrays her feelings of emptiness as an evil part of herself that lives in the innermost area of her being and threatens to devour her in an unguarded moment, a threat not of physical but of psychological death that is always with her. But despite this dangerous being inside her, and despite the growing psychological problems she has through her work with dying patients, she is able to keep up an ordinary life with Bill for most of the time, “[a]cting [n]ormal.” (311)

After a public presentation of her women’s project, Lynda meets Shad Meshad, one of the most distinguished researchers on PTSD, a psychologist and a Vietnam veteran himself. He confronts her with her personal situation in no uncertain terms: “‘Lynda, you are in trouble,’ Shad insisted. ‘It’s obvious. If you don’t get help soon – before you try to help others – you are going to kill yourself. I can guarantee it.’” (350) Shortly afterwards she starts therapy with Meshad: “It was as if I were exorcising a ghost that had haunted me for a decade. [...] I no longer had to hold things inside. I no longer had to keep up a front. It was all right to hurt. It was all right to ask for help. I wasn’t crazy.” (351) Again, she regards her war experiences as a spirit-like force that “haunted” her. But this time she sees this force not as inextricably inside herself, but as a being which can be expelled. The veterans’ group on the one hand enables her to connote her experience in positive terms, to feel proud of having served. Further, it allows her to identify the American government as solely responsible for the events in war. Meshad on the other hand confirms and reinforces with his authority as a veteran and a doctor the view of herself as a victim and enables her to shed her burden:

Of all the things that Shad did for me, I was most touched by what he said when I told him how unappreciated I had felt. Shad had been a psych officer [...] and had known hundreds of nurses like me. He had enormous respect for each and every one of us. We were all doing something very positive, he reassured me. Our job was overwhelming, he said, but we nurses triumphed. And most importantly, we saved the lives of people who might otherwise have died. “You were my heroes,” Shad said. When I heard his words, I knew he meant them. Hearing them made me believe in myself. I felt reborn. (351)

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Her negative self-definition as a victim becomes a new and positive component: she is now able to regard herself as a person who did heroic, even life-saving, work even though she was victimized by her own government.

Lynda is finally able to free herself from the memory of Gene when she meets Calvin, “a man who was the embodiment of Gene, with one exception: This young bleeder had survived.” (355) Having had nearly his whole face destroyed by a white phosphorous round, he admits to having been angry with the medical personnel who “didn’t just let me die [and who would] sentence guys like me to lives like that.” Now she is finally able to explain that “[w]e never thought beyond tomorrow, Calvin. We never thought beyond the next casualty. We just cut them up, sewed them back together, and sent them to Japan. Our job was to save lives. Tomorrow was for others to worry about.” (355) Calvin is able to exculpate Lynda and to free her from the feeling of guilt and of being a failure because he has survived. Despite his horrible wounds, he is able to lead a normal life. Lynda is now able to regard her service in Vietnam as meaningful and crucial: “Calvin and I spent four hours [...] freeing ourselves from our ghosts. When it was over, we each found some measure of peace. I knew that Gene wouldn’t follow me any more.” (356)

Proudly Van Devanter presents what she has been able to do for the treatment and recognition of women veterans. For herself she concludes:

Vietnam had robbed thousands of us of a future. Maybe the problem came from the day-to-day existence in the middle of destruction. Maybe it was because of the constant presence of death. Maybe it was the knowledge, in war, that tomorrow wasn’t going to be any better than today. For years, I carried the emptiness with me. But the emptiness is gone now. Lately, although innocence is only a faint memory, I’ve regained a measure of the happiness I had before I left for Vietnam. [...] I’ve reached the point where I can truthfully say that the war has lost its ability to destroy me. I’m back in control of my own life and I’m proud to call myself a veteran. It has been a long, dark night, but I’m finally reaching home. (359)

Van Devanter is able to construct an unified identity. She links her present feelings to those of her younger self before the war and integrates it into her present view of herself. Her veteran identity now serves for her as a source of pride and no longer needs to be hidden. Nevertheless, the continuous form of the last sentence points

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towards the unfinished quality of her recovery process of which the autobiographical writing is a part.

As a representative of the women's branch of the VVA, Lynda takes part in a journey to Vietnam. At Tan Son Nhut airport, the place where she had left Vietnam, Lynda experiences a cathartic moment. In tears, she explains to a fellow traveler as well as to the reader: "I just figured out that it wasn't Vietnam that sucked, it was the war. I wanted to come back here to find something I had left, and I just found it. It was my youth, my innocence. I know now that I can never get them back, but I've touched them, and it's okay. I know where they went. [...]' I buried my head in his shoulder and let the tears wash away the war." (373-374) Lynda is able to construct a link to her pre-war self and thus to present a undisrupted image of her identity again. She is now in touch again with "[t]he Lynda I had known before the war" (199) and able to reintegrate her war experiences as a part of her personal development. She has shed some parts and gained others, but feels in touch with every part of herself.

Finally, she and her fellow veterans meet for prayer. They form a circle and hold each other's hands, then

Gary began to speak, the soft gentle words of a minister. We remembered from his prayers our fallen friends; the 57,000 who lost their lives here, the many hundreds of thousands who gave, by their blood, to the war, the millions of our brothers and sisters who had fought here. [...] We sent our prayers for our warriors to the heavens, our prayers for their peace and respite, and our prayers for the world. They were the prayers of those who know dearly the cost of war, and know deeply the meaning of peace and freedom. [...] Gary intoned his and our heartfelt hopes for the rest of our brothers and sisters, alive and not, Americans all, who answered a call and gave of themselves. (374-375)

Van Devanter claims a privileged speaking position for veterans, who are the only ones to understand the meaning of war and peace to its fullest. This time the Vietnamese are excluded from the exclusive brother- and sisterhood of warriors. The American veterans are at the same time all victims and patriots, they "answered a call and gave of themselves." Traits of her former wartime self that do not fit the construction of identity are relegated to the context of the war, which is regarded as a dehumanizing force of superhuman powers that victimizes every participant.

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These powers have been let loose by the American politicians who subsequently are assigned the full responsibility for the war and its consequences for those who fought it. Van Devanter thus safely and completely reconstructs her identity as whole, integrating the Vietnam experience as a meaningful event for her “rebirth and growth.” (ix)

Afterword

In the “Afterword, 2001”²⁶⁷ which ends the new edition of *Home Before Morning* Van Devanter admits that she has never been able to leave Vietnam completely behind. She also admits how important it is “to make sense, and good, come from it.” (319) When she participates in the celebrations for the 25th anniversary of the war’s end in Detroit, she is able to meet Vietnamese veterans and writers. She inserts a poem in her “Afterword” which she wrote for a female ex-Vietcong fighter. The poem emphasizes the human sameness of the former enemies:

But, together, our perfectly fluent tears
And laughter
And embraces
And New York Super Fudge Chunk
Create a new language
A bridge to connect us
That no bombs can destroy.
The tears from our separate souls of old pain
Mingle and become the same
As they roll from the eyes of our souls
Merging on our embracing cheekbones
[...]
Watering our freeze-dried memories
And washing them clean. (325)

This is, as Van Devanter says, where she is today, emotionally and spiritually. (324) Shared emotions bring both women together, different as they are, and overcome the differences. These emotions are stronger than political beliefs, even stronger than the war experiences which have divided Americans and Vietnamese. Through the silent mutual understanding this division has now ended. The purging of her war memories from negative emotions completes Van Devanter’s process of coming to terms with her war experiences.

²⁶⁷ Van Devanter, *Home*, 2001, p. 317-326.

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IV. A BUDDY, NOT A SWEETHEART - Winnie Smith: *American Daughter Gone to War: On the Front Lines with an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (1992)²⁶⁸

*Biographical Sketch*²⁶⁹

Winnie Smith was born in New York in 1944. She decided to make nursing her career and joined the Army Nurse Corps at the age of nineteen. Two years later, in 1966, she volunteered for duty in Vietnam to serve in combat nursing. First stationed at Camp Zama, Japan, she was finally sent to Vietnam and assigned to the Third Field Hospital in Saigon and afterwards to the Twenty-fourth Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh. After her return to the States in 1967 she found it difficult to reintegrate herself into American society again and suffered increasingly from the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Finally she gave up nursing to study geography at San Francisco State University. The reading of Lynda Van Devanter's autobiography led her to deal with her experiences and memories of Vietnam. The recognition and homecoming parades for Vietnam veterans, and the dedication of the Vietnam memorials on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in the 80s helped her further to overcome her feelings of alienation from American society and to come to terms with her Vietnam experiences. In 1992 her autobiography *American Daughter Gone To War* appeared. After Van Devanter's and Lynn Hampton's accounts, it is only the third autobiography by a female Vietnam veteran. Smith's book was praised by Lynda Van Devanter as "devastatingly honest, stunningly written and completely unforgettable. [...] If you never understood the soul-searing, bone-wearying waste and futility of war, you will after reading *American Daughter Gone to War*"²⁷⁰. The reviewer in *Kirkus Reviews* also emphasizes that the book conveys "[n]o false heroics, no patriotic gloss, only the Vietnam War in all its grim reality." Both reviews underline the truthfulness and authenticity of the account. The "reality" of the Vietnam war describes the reviewer of *Kirkus Reviews* as follows: "Hospitals she served in [...] were nightmarish places of inadequate supplies and equipment, squalid living quarters, and men with wounds so terrible

²⁶⁸ The quote is taken from Smith 291.

²⁶⁹ Since there is no other biographical information available about Winnie Smith, I had to rely on the autobiography for the brief 'Biographical Sketch'.

²⁷⁰ Blurp from *American Daughter*.

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that it was difficult at times for Smith not to show her own horror and dismay. The local Vietnamese were exploitative and resentful, nothing seemed to work, and the war was obviously not going well.” This and Van Devanter’s reviews describe the war experience as destructive and utterly negative. They neglect those experiences Smith describes as positive and unique: the close friendship of the personnel, the intimate bonds with the patients, the professionally highly rewarding work, and her pride of having served in the war. The emphasis on the negative experiences is in line with the public view of women’s war experiences as they are expressed in Glenna Goodacre’s design of the Vietnam Women’s Memorial, which was unveiled one year after the appearance of Smith’s book.

American Daughter Gone to War

The Narrative

Winnie Smith’s²⁷¹ autobiography is separated into twenty-two chapters and an “Introduction,” a proleptic chapter set before the point of attack in the first chapter. The “Introduction” begins *in medias res* of war, on “[o]ne December Day, 1966” in Saigon (13). As all chapters concerning her service in the military and the time afterwards, the introductory chapter is also set in present tense. The chapter presents some of the red threads of the book: the uncaring military, the exceptional role of women in the male world of war, the distinction between those who experience war first hand and the outsiders who manage the war, and especially Winnie Smith’s continuing appreciation of and admiration for the American fighting men: “[...] these are the greatest guys in the world. In my heart, they always will be.” (16) At this point of the narration the voice of the older and the younger persona blend: Winnie’s emotions concerning her “warrior family” (27) have not changed through her war experiences. This continuity is also expressed in the last sentence of the introductory chapter: “Indeed, it feels as though I’ve known them all my life.” (16)

The chapter titles resemble titles of diary entries: “September-October 1996: The Third Field Hospital, Saigon” (9).²⁷² The diary-like titles evoke the impression that

²⁷¹ To be able to distinguish the younger from the older self throughout the narration, I will call the younger one ‘Winnie’ and the older ‘Smith.’

²⁷² Sharon Grant Wildwind also chose the form of a diary for her autobiography *Dreams That Blister Sleep*. In contrast to Smith, however, her entries cover nearly every day, they are not developed into

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Smith confidentially shares her experiences with the reader. Her thoughts and feelings appear unmediated and authentic. Authenticity, G. Thomas Couser argues, is mainly a matter of the relation between the text and its source. (72) This relation appears very immediate. The diary-like chapter titles function to obscure the distance between Smith's actual experiences, thoughts and feelings, and their edited version in the text. The narrative distance thus appears minimized. Dorrit Cohn observes that "the diary is [...] traditionally the first-person form that lends itself most naturally to a focus on the *present* moment [...]." (*Transparent Minds* 209) Thus, the chapter titles allow the reader to feel integrated in the events and experiences, more as a participant than a spectator. Smith thus tries to promote empathy, respect and social acceptance of herself and, by extension, of her fellow veterans by the reading public. Consequently, she thanks her readers for their "concern for what happened to us in Vietnam, and by extension an effort to understand how any war affects those who go." (8)

Smith adds fifteen black-and-white photographs to the text (183-190). All photographs illustrate specific events described in the text. They show herself as a child with her family and as a nurse in Vietnam, wounded and orphaned Vietnamese children, street scenes of Saigon, and finally, herself with her son. These pictures, especially those from Vietnam serve as a means to assert the veracity of her autobiographical narration. The private photos offer a glimpse into Smith's family album for the reader. They add a further dimension of familiarity with the author. Thus, the reader is given the impression that he is treated as a friend and confidant. Similar to the chapter titles, the pictures enhance identification with and understanding for Smith. At the same time, the selection of pictures allows Smith to influence decisively the way she is perceived by the readers. The insertion of pictures and letters link the text to extratextual reference points that are supposed to verify and support the narration. As Ansgar Nünning, following Natascha Würzbach, argues, the "nicht konkret referentialisierbare Angaben über Personen, Ort und Zeit" as well as "ein hohes Maß an Mehrdeutigkeit," among others, indicate the fictionality of texts. (*Von historischer Fiktion* 155) Then, in contrast, one could argue that the attempt to link the narrative to extratextual reference points such as

larger chapters. Thus, she enforces the impression of immediate presentation of thoughts, feelings and experiences even more than Smith.

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pictures or letters to verify the content of the narration can be regarded as 'signposts of non-fictionality,'²⁷³ or, following Reinhart Kosellek, as "Wirklichkeitssignale." (285)

Milton Bates notes that Smith's autobiography had a professional editor who decisively influenced the structure of the narration.²⁷⁴ (*Wars* 169) Indeed, Smith acknowledges the assistance of a female "independent editor in the Bay area, who helped me with my writing" (7), although she does not specify which kind of help she received. It is impossible to delimit to which extent Smith's original text was changed by the editor. But apparently either Smith herself or the professional editor took Van Devanter's book as the model for the structure of Smith's autobiography.²⁷⁵ Both books begin *in medias res* with a proleptic narration of events in Vietnam. And both narrate in the ensuing chapters their respective biographies chronologically from their youth to the time when both women had come to terms with their Vietnam experiences. In both autobiographies, letters by family members are integrated in the narration as a means to underline the authenticity of the narrative for the reader. (Bates, *Wars* 169) They also emphasize the development of the experiencing I by contrasting Winnie's changing views with those expressed in the letters from home. Thus, they provide a comment on Lynda's or Winnie's situation and experiences which produces irony through contrast. As the letters inserted in Van Devanter's autobiography, they serve as a means to direct the sympathies of the readers and to enhance the identification of the reader with Winnie.

Literature and Writing

Winnie's flashbacks and finally the decision to seek psychological help are triggered by the reading of Lynda Van Devanter's autobiography *Home Before Morning*²⁷⁶ at the climax of her personal crisis and depression. Van Devanter's

²⁷³ Dorrit Cohn uses the phrase to describe the criteria which distinguish fictional texts from non-fictional texts. See "Signposts of Fictionality."

²⁷⁴ For a classification of collaborative autobiography see Lejeune, "Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write."

²⁷⁵ See chapter IV.1. of this study.

²⁷⁶ Another nurse, Linda J. McClanahan, experiences a similar reaction when reading an article by Van Devanter – an indication for the importance of Van Devanter's work for female veterans as well as for the isolation of the individual women veterans. See Walker, *Piece of My Heart* 30-31.

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narration of a nightmare about wounded soldiers in Vietnam release Winnie's closed-in memories and emotions. Smith quotes extensively from Van Devanter's text. Thus, she directly connects the sentences Winnie reads with the emotions they trigger in her. This is a time in her life when Winnie has not yet found a language to communicate her traumatic Vietnam experiences. To represent Winnie's inability to express her experiences, Smith borrows the words of another person who had undergone similar experiences to verbalize Winnie's experiences by proxy. Also, the quotes from Van Devanter's text give credence to Winnie's emotions and experiences, just as the female Vietnam veteran in the Vet Center who "has been where I've been, seen what I've seen, done what I've done" gives "credence" (301) to her own experiences and emotions.

At this point of the narration, the narrative speed slows down until story time and discourse time are nearly isochronous.

[Van Devanter] writes: "Maybe, if there were time, he could be saved. But there were too many others." My tears fall in a torrent. From deep within me, from a lake of sorrow that I have long since forgotten existed, a desolate spirit breaks loose like a great sea serpent. I feel it rise to the surface, and clutch my sides in a desperate hug as if I could hold it in. Unbidden, unwanted, its moaning wail escapes my lips and unfurls above the sunny backyards of my neighbors. (297)

The psychonarration creates the impression of immediate insights in Winnie's sorrows and sufferings. The use of the narrative present as well as the absence of the narrating I in this passage intensify the impression of immediacy. Smith's own poetic, metaphorical language contrasts to Van Devanter's sober narration of events and underlines the intensity of her feelings. Smith uses the image of a sea serpent rising from a lake of sorrow to describe the monstrosity of the "desolate spirit" within her.²⁷⁷ As "tears" and "torrent," the words "spirit," "sea serpent" and "sorrow" are closely linked by the alliterations. The alliteration, as well as the onomatopoeic "moaning wail," emphasizes these words and intensify the impression of deep, intense pain Smith suffers from. The metaphor of the sea

²⁷⁷ The image of something evil inside her soul is also used by Van Devanter. In contrast to Smith, she identifies "emptiness" as this evil, threatening force: "[...] I knew inside that the emptiness was never far away. It lurked in a dark corner of my soul. Waiting." (324)

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serpent alludes to the biblical serpent as the agent of evil, but even more to the sea serpent Hydra in Greek mythology.²⁷⁸ This allusion may be understood on the one hand as an image of evil, on the other hand also as an indication that it will be a Herculean task indeed for Winnie to overcome her psychological problems.

Winnie Smith is not a professional writer, and her autobiography is her only book to date. Her reason for writing her autobiography is not, as O'Brien to tell "war stories" (*If I Die* 32), or as Caputo to be the chronicler of a generation's experience (*Rumor* xx) and the battle singer who makes sense of the senseless war ("Postscript" 355). Rather, similar to Van Devanter (*Home* ix), Smith uses writing as a form of personal therapy to keep her sanity: "I discover writing helps me regain control of my mind." (299) Writing also helps her to "record" (299) parts of the "[e]vents from my year in Vietnam [which] play through my mind's eye like reels of a movie. I am powerless to stop it. I am the captive audience." (297) She suffers from flashbacks in which "war-torn forms stagger out of my broken heart, pour out of my eyes, tear my breath away as they spill from my open mouth. I struggle for air, rocking on my knees and bowing in their presence. I hear myself begging over and over, 'Why, oh, why, oh, *why*? Why so much? Why so many? Why? Why? *Why*?' " (297) Her emotions and memories she has suppressed for such a long time now forcibly seize control from her. She can only let it happen and 'bow' to their presence in a gesture of surrender. Similar to Van Devanter (*Home* 359), Winnie is not able to answer her main question 'why' the war caused so much pain and loss for so many people. She not only remembers her experiences, she actually re-lives them. Her body reacts as if she would actually participate in the events: "Sweat trickles under my arms and scalp; adrenaline surges through me. When they go, I am drained; I have been as much a participant in their coming as a spectator." (297)

The account of her flashbacks indicates that Smith is severely traumatized by her war experiences. In his seminal study *Achilles in Vietnam* Jonathan Shay argues that in the early stages

²⁷⁸ Hydra is the name of a sea serpent who lives in a lake at Lerna near Argos in Greece. The serpent has nine heads, eight of which are mortal, and one is immortal. It becomes Hercules' second task to kill the sea serpent. He tries to decapitate her, but for every head he severs two others grow. Finally, he is able to cut off her heads and keep them from growing again by burning her neck.

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[t]raumatic memory is not narrative. Rather, it is experience that reoccurs, either as full sensory replay of traumatic events in dreams or flashbacks, with all things seen, heard, smelled, and felt intact, or as disconnected fragments. [...] creating a language of emotion [...] is an important part of gaining mastery over the traumatic memory. Naming is one of the early stages of the communalization of trauma by rendering it communicable, however imperfectly. (172-173)²⁷⁹

To write down the bits and pieces of her experiences allows Winnie to gain a certain degree of control over them. In the process of writing, she connects the disparate pieces. She is no longer the captive of her mind's movie reels, but now able to control, contain and process them. They are no longer frightening "specters" and "ghosts" (297) that haunt her relentlessly. Writing empowers her to take possession of her personal history. Instead of constantly being unwillingly involved in the mental re-enactment of her Vietnam experiences, she is now able to relegate them into the past because "once they are put to paper, they fade back into the past, change from experience to memory." (299) This is in line with Shay's argument for the importance of narrative therapy: "Narrative can transform involuntary reexperiencing of traumatic events into memory of the events, thereby reestablishing authority over memory." (192)

Milton Bates cautions against the application of therapeutical models to storytelling: "To do so is to suggest that a war story is the pathological symptom of a victim rather than the consciously crafted work of an artist." (Bates, *Wars* 256) Indeed, many authors have emphasized that their writings were not meant to be therapeutic, for example Larry Heinemann in *Paco's Story* or Tim O'Brien's narrator in *The Things They Carried*. In contrast to those writers, Smith herself implies the interpretation of her narrative as a means of therapy. This may be connected to the changed view of the Vietnam veterans and the recognition of women veterans in the early nineties. The trauma victim, as Shay observes, needs security and a sympathetic, trustworthy audience which refrains from judging the narrator who tells his or her traumatic story. (188-189) At the beginning of the nineties, Americans were ready to provide this sympathetic, trustworthy, unjudgmental

²⁷⁹ Nevertheless, it is not always possible for trauma victims to narrate their traumatic experiences. A trauma can be so severe that it "disconnect[s] the autobiographer from time and from place so radically that narrative ceases to function." Eakin, *Lives* 140.

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audience for female Vietnam veterans and to honor their service and sufferings.²⁸⁰ “Only when America was ready to confront the repressed trauma of Vietnam could individual storytellers proceed with the work of memory, mourning, and finally reconnection.” (Bates, *Wars* 257)

The writing of *American Daughter Gone to War* enables Smith to link the separate memories into a coherent story. Shay argues: “When a survivor creates [sic] fully realized narrative that brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together again the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused.” (188) In the process of writing, she regains control over her own life-story. In this “intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation” (Eakin, *Fictions* 3), the bits and pieces of her Vietnam memories develop into episodes and stories. The autobiography is a step further to control her memories and to distance herself from them - the movie reels of her time in Vietnam develop from experience to memory to story. (Shay 192) The plot structure of her autobiography helps her to construct her life-story as a chronologically unfolding and causally connected plot. Eakin argues that the “[u]se of the first person [...] compounds our sense of being in full command of our knowledge of our selves and stories; it not only conveniently bridges the gaps between who we were once and who we are today, but it tends as well to make our sense of self in any present moment seem more unified and organized than it possible could be.” (*Lives* ix). On the pages of her autobiography Smith is able to create her biography anew. She can select from her memories, which are “constructed anew in each memory event” and thus “plural” (Eakin, *Lives* 106), those parts which fit into the image she has of herself and to negate those which disturb or do not fit into this self-image. In the new version of the narrative of her life she is able to mend the breaks in her life-story and her identity which the Vietnam experiences have caused. It also enables her to integrate the war experiences into her life-story in a positive and productive way and to contain the trauma. Thus, narrative becomes a “mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience” (Eakin, *Lives* 100), and also a means of creating a an unbroken identity.

²⁸⁰ See chapter II.2.2. of this study.

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Consequently, Smith's autobiography ends with the assurance that she has overcome her trauma and that Vietnam is no more than an occasional memory: "As for Vietnam, these days I hardly ever think about it." (352).

Cultural Background

Winnie regards the war in Vietnam as necessary and right, she is even "a gung-ho supporter of the war" ("American Daughter," *Kirkus Reviews*). Her cultural background, her upbringing and her family history lead her to believe in the necessity of the war. She has been taught that "freedom, our way of life, must be protected at all costs." (20) Similar to Van Devanter (*Home* 23-24) and many of her fellow Americans,²⁸¹ she believes that the war is justified. Besides, her family heritage compels her to go to war: "I come from a long line of warriors, at least back to the Civil war [...]." (20) Having served in a war is regarded as unambiguously positive, and as a matter of "pride and honor" (20) in her family. Her father, a veteran of the Second World War, "watches every World War II movie shown on TV – no matter how many times he had seen them – clearly proud of his part in the war, although he never discussed it." (22) He replaces his own short but horrifying war experience²⁸² with the "systematically sanitized, Norman Rockwellized, not to mention Disneyfied" version of the "Good War" which is presented by Hollywood (Fussell, *Wartime* 268).²⁸³ Consequently, Winnie grows up with this distorted notion of war, and not, due to her father's silence on the subject, with her father's personal experience. And Winnie is lured into the Army by a similarly sanitized and glamorized image of Army nurses who "looked proud and prestigious in uniforms with insignia, [who were] dining at swank officer's clubs and sight-seeing around the world." (22)²⁸⁴ Winnie

²⁸¹ See, for example, Hampton, *Fighting Strength* 8.

²⁸² Her father watched a friend die despite his efforts to save him, and lost a leg in the fighting in Germany which ended the war for him. (347)

²⁸³ Despite a few anti-war films of the fifties, such as Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957) or *On the Beach* (1959), "Hollywood, like other creators of popular culture after 1945, mostly celebrated American involvement in World War II." (Patterson 347).

²⁸⁴ Many nurses say that the opportunity to travel was one of the main reasons for them to join the army. See, for example, Karen Johnson Burnett's and Donna Cull Peck's accounts in Walker, *Piece of My Heart* 181-204. See also Bates, who identifies "the lure of adventure" as one of the main motives for women to join the Army (*Wars* 163). – Today the Army still emphasizes in the promotional brochures the "world of adventure" waiting for prospective soldiers: "Training could take you to parts of the U.S. or the world you've never seen before. Or you could receive an assignment for duty in Hawaii, the Caribbean, Alaska, the Far East or Europe. [...] Experiencing new cultures can be an adventure in itself." The text is accompanied by pictures of happy young men and women with surfing, in fancy restaurants and on skiing slopes, creating the impression of Army life as an enduring adventurous holiday. Quoted from the brochure *Army Adventure*.

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joins the Army with Hollywood's version of the Second World War and glossy pictures of Army nurses as the framework in which she perceives the Vietnam war and Army life.

Winnie is enticed by the idea of actually going to war. Similar to many male and female soldiers, she fears to miss something important in her life if she does not go to war: the opportunity to prove herself under difficult conditions, to prove her patriotism and courage, and commit her professional skills to the care of wounded soldiers as a combat nurse. (20)²⁸⁵ Thus, she volunteers for duty in Vietnam. Despite her parents' basically positive view of service in the armed forces, they are reluctant to accept Winnie's decision. Her father objects that "[w]ar's no place for a girl [...]. It's hard enough on men." (23) He thus voices a commonplace conservative view of gender and war. His distinction between "girls" - not "women" - and "men" indicates that he does not regard female soldiers as grown-ups who can deal with the same hardships as male soldiers on an equal footing.²⁸⁶ Further, his comment that war is "hard" gives a brief insight in his own war experiences, which are at most times hidden under the Hollywoodized version of war.²⁸⁷ Nevertheless, Winnie who believes in Hollywood rather than in the hints of her father, insists on volunteering for Vietnam. (23)

The War Experiences

The initial experiences at Winnie's first duty station overseas, Camp Zama in Japan, reinforce her patriotic, heroic and glamorous notions about war. Everything seems familiar: The base looks like "Any Base, U.S.A." (24) and her images of war gained from the Second World War films seem to come alive when she sees an ambulance

²⁸⁵ Many nurses state similar reasons for volunteering for a tour of duty in Vietnam. See for example Judy Hartline Elbring's account: [...] the story I had heard my father tell [about the Second World War] made it sound like [war] was very exciting. It was a chance to contribute, it was very patriotic, it was an American thing to do, and it was something I could do now. I couldn't do it as a soldier, but I could do it as a nurse." (Steinman 140)

²⁸⁶ The opinion that war is a male preserve is quite common in American culture of the time. Van Devanter, for example, relates that a female friend of hers comments her decision to join the war by saying: "You're [...] nuts. If you had any brains, you'd do exactly what I'm going to do: Find a decent job, get married, and have a house full of kids. Leave the wars to the men." (47). See also Patterson, chap. 12 ff.

²⁸⁷ Winnie realizes that the films have not been able to overwrite the actual war experiences when her father first discloses his memories to her: "The memories never go away. They only hibernate." (347) But despite her own war experience Winnie herself is only able to visualize her father's memories as a scene from an "old movie" (347).

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which “is the same as those in the old war movies I watched with my father as a child.” (28) The officers’ club resembles a bar out of an “American western,” and the television shows “John Wayne westerns.” (26) Images of the Second World War mix with those of the Hollywood version of the West, and both suggest the heroism of the fighting men and the righteousness of the American cause. Slotkin argues that Wayne, the “‘recruiting poster’ idealization for military heroism,” is a cultural icon which “reminds us of a time when right was right, wrong was wrong, and the differences between them could be set right by the simplest means.” (*Gunfighter Nation* 519) But in contrast to many male veterans who confess to have had the illusion to be John Wayne in Vietnam,²⁸⁸ Winnie is much more intrigued by “the yarns our warriors spun, no matter that fantasies and half-truths were woven into the telling.” (26)²⁸⁹ She is not interested in learning how war is really like, but in the excitement and adventure of war stories. The soldiers’ stories and “the warrior’s air of bravado and cocky self-assurance” (25) reinforce her romantic, heroic notions about war. These notions are also expressed by her calling her fellow male soldiers “warriors” instead of “soldiers.” The word evokes images of romantic knights in shining armor rather than of grunts in grungy combat fatigues toting their M-16s.²⁹⁰ Also, Winnie romanticizes the first impressions of Vietnam. The war seems “intriguing, even exciting, despite the heat, dust, and Saigon Revenge. It was the stuff of which movies are made, with tents and Quonset huts, Jeeps and helicopters, concertina wire and guarded gates, warriors in fatigues and weapons of war.” (191)

War changes Winnie’s perception of time. She develops a twofold experience of time: war time and peace time. War time is circular, it “brings in casualties and takes away friends. Nothing changes but the numbers and the faces ebbing and flowing across the Tropic of Cancer. [...]. Time simply passes in the circle of work, club, and sleep.” (37) Peace time, in contrast, moves forward. In this time “the

²⁸⁸ See Bates, *Wars* 145.

²⁸⁹ For the perception of Vietnam in terms of Western films see also chapter V. of this study.

²⁹⁰ Paul Fussell identifies the word “warrior”, used by British writers of the First World War as belonging to the “special diction” inspired by “especially the Arthurian poems of Tennyson and the pseudo-medieval romances of William Morris.” (*Great War* 21) Although it seems unlikely that Smith has read these poems and novels, she nevertheless captures the romantic and heroic notion of war.

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passing of hours and days with the rise and fall of the sun has meaning, [and] what I do and who I meet changes with the passing of these things. It is a huge relief to keep time by this other clock. I use it as often as I can.” (37) But only after a few weeks of combat nursing, Winnie is no longer able to live by to the peacetime clock: “Hours become days, and there is the sense there will never be an end to where we are or what we are doing. In a matter of weeks, short by peacetime standards but long in a war zone, I’m an ‘old-timer’.” (122) In the wartime world of Vietnam, the normal perception of time is suspended. The passage of time only means that the same circle of activities is repeated over and over again, eternally as the sea, as the metaphor of soldiers “ebbing and flowing across the Tropic of Cancer” suggests, and with as little progress as the sea. In contrast to this wartime perception of time, in her narrative Smith emphasizes the forward movement of time: The chapter titles, which always include the statement of the exact time covered in the chapter, structure the book according to the chronology of events. The parts of the book are not presented as repetitious; instead, they emphasize the progress of time as well as of Winnie’s development. Smith overcomes the circularity of her war clock and transfers her autobiographical memory, “the enduring chronologically sequenced memory for significant events from one’s own life” (Eakin, *Lives* 108), into plot. Thus, she is able to integrate her war experiences into her life story as part of her development.

Despite the daily horrors of wartime nursing, Winnie also discovers the compelling beauty of war: From her roof, she watches “the added attraction of flares wavering over [Tan Son Nhut Airport] and, on special occasions, a fire fight.” (90) When she visits a party, the base comes under attack: “The party resumes as though nothing ever happened, save the added attraction of a spectacular light show through the picture plate glass window. [...] It’s enchantingly, disarmingly beautiful.” (147) Smith thus contradicts Klaus Theweleit’s thesis: “I can’t imagine a woman having written or writing the sentence ‘War is beautiful’ (except in a TRASH MOVIE directed by a man). It’s a gendered sign. A sticker to be shown proudly. That sentence somehow marks the surface line of that abyss known as the ‘gender gap’.” (312)²⁹¹ Smith’s statement demonstrates, as Bates concludes, “the futility

²⁹¹ Smith is not the only woman veteran to call war “beautiful.” See also Wildwind who states: “War creates a beauty almost too bright to endure.” (217)

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of drawing any such line. [The nurses] testify to the beauty of war as spectacle, even when they know that their aesthetic pleasure is about to give way to horror in the triage and operating rooms.” (*Wars* 165)

In Vietnam, Winnie becomes increasingly doubtful of the values which have brought her to the war: “My romantic notions about the war have fallen by the wayside, and now my love for my country is slipping away.” (160) Despite her doubts, she soon refrains from discussing the U.S. presence in Vietnam, similar to the casualties, who “care about their buddies, not politics.” (143) Consciously closing her ears to political discussions, she concludes: “My job is to care for the wounded, not to ask why they exist. Nothing else matters save when the war would end, but that topic is never raised.” (124) She concentrates solely on her job and refrains from wasting her time and energy with fruitless discussions, a luxury enjoyed by the war protesters and detached intellectuals far away in the U.S. her mother talks about in her letters. (128, 148)

Winnie clings to the belief that the war is justified because “[a]ll the maimed bodies and souls I’ve seen make it unthinkable that we could be wrong.” (181) It is impossible for her to question the American presence in Vietnam. Her central question “Why? Why so much? Why so many?” (297), which implies the question concerning the justification of the war in Vietnam, is too painful to be asked and therefore avoided. Mithers states that it is especially important for the military personnel who “must deal with [the war’s] casualties, that it be fought for a purpose so clear and important that people can bear sights like an armless, legless man begging to die because they are able to attach some meaning to his suffering.” (77) Winnie needs to belief in the justification of the American involvement in Vietnam. As psychologist Shad Meshad argues, nurses in Vietnam “brought up to nurture and protect others, felt like failures because no matter what they did the GIs kept dying.” (MacPherson, *Long Time Passing* 449) To make the feeling of being a “failure” bearable for Winnie, she has to attach a meaning to the sufferings of the soldiers and further, also to her own sufferings.

Winnie observes herself changing: She is no longer able to weep at departure of her warrior friends (84), takes refuge in excessive drinking (93), hardens emotionally

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(208) and avoids becoming close to anyone. (175) She knows that her work in the war zone has changed her profoundly and permanently: "My perception of hard work, of exhaustion, of tragedy is forever changed. They have become facts of life, the standard by which we live and work, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm where I want to be – as close to a combat nurse as I can be [...]." (119) But despite the daily encounter with death and destruction and the changes she observes in herself, Winnie agrees with her friend who states that she is "not sorry I came to this stinkin' excuse for a country, but I'll sure be glad when my year's up." (153) She thus affirms her decision to go to Vietnam and become a combat nurse. She can maintain this part of her self and integrate her wartime experiences and changes in herself as part of her continuous identity as a combat nurse and later, as a proud Vietnam veteran. Nevertheless, she is ambivalent about her own development: "[...] I wonder if I can ever get back to who I was before I got here." (153) Her doubts underline her own awareness of her change and also prefigure the problems of reintegration she has after her return to the States.

The war experience has changed her values, things that were important for her before the war – fashion, every-day life her mother talks about in her letters – have lost their importance because of Winnie's daily confrontation with death and destruction. The every-day life her mother's letters and the newspaper are concerned with have lost all significance for Winnie. The fact that people at home still have these concerns alienates her thoroughly and she feels that her "love for my country is slipping away." (160) She feels that her country is not even interested in the things that have become the main content of her life in Vietnam: The American sons and daughters have been sent to fight a war, and then been forgotten by those who sent them. Despite the feeling of alienation from the homeland, thinking of the United States serves as an affirmation that a world exists outside Vietnam and outside of the war, a civilized world "where cars have doors, and showers have hot water, that gushes rather than trickles. Where people wash off a little grime, not layers of dirt and sweat and blood." Vietnam thus is regarded as the netherworld of American civilization.

Toward the end of her tour, Winnie is no longer able to relate to her former self. On a visit to her old duty station in Japan, she discovers a feeling that she "no longer

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belongs.” Having hoped to ”recapture the part of me who laughed and played before I went to Vietnam,” she only feels haunted by the memories of the soldiers she had known. (175) Consequently, the only place she can relate to is Vietnam. The war experiences have changed her so much that she no longer belongs to peacetime places. ”I’ve grown accustomed to the noise, the sickening stench, the thick, oppressive heat, the bloodied bodies. This is where I belong now, no matter how much I hate it.” She is a part of the war and the war has become a part of herself. (180) She also feels emotionally attached to Vietnam. ”If home is where the heart is, this must be my home. [...] I have always been here, belong here. Why am I leaving?” (239) After one year in the war zone, her former life seems obliterated, and the year in Vietnam feels like her whole life for her. She also feels guilt at leaving her patients and her fellow soldiers behind. (239)

Vietnam and the Vietnamese

Vietnam greets Winnie with “blazing heat” and a stench ”like an giant outhouse on a hot summer’s day.” (44)²⁹² The unfavorable first impression of the “poisoned world” (Appy 127) of Vietnam is intensified by her living quarters which look ”like a prison” (48) due to the high fences with concertina wire. Despite this unwelcoming welcome, she feels like entering ”a new world, fascinatingly different from anywhere I’ve been. Yet, I realize, I feel more as if I belong here than I did in New Jersey.” (50) The vibrance and energy of the culture and Vietnamese life fascinates her. And despite the strangeness of Vietnam she feels closer to the new world of Vietnam than to the old world of East Coast family life, which has already become alien to her (42-43).

The fascination quickly fades when Winnie gets in touch with the local population: she feels constantly cheated by the Vietnamese peddlers and pedicab drivers and is angry about their supposed ingratitude: ”Aren’t our soldiers helping these people defend their freedom and democracy? Where is their gratitude?” (54) She regards the Vietnamese as sly and deceitful: ”How can they be so two-faced as to take our

²⁹² These impressions of the country have almost become a cliché, because nearly every soldier, male or female, describes them in similar terms. Diana Dwan Poole, for example, felt that “stench and the heat hit me square in the face and almost knocked me down. [...] it smelled so awful. It was really horrible, and hot.” (Steinman 34). Rick Loffler talked about the “heavy, lousy, sweet smell” and the heat “that flushes your head” in his letter home (Edelman 5). See also Appy 117-130, and chapter II.2.1. of this study.

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help in the day and kill our men in the night?" (140) and feels culturally superior to them who supposedly "don't even know how to sit right in an outhouse" (52).²⁹³ Fear, confusion and loathing lead to a hostile and distanced attitude toward all Vietnamese which pushes her wish to help ailing children and poor people (41) aside: "I came with the hope of serving [the children] some way, not just our soldiers. Now I pray they will leave me alone." (60)

Winnie also reacts angrily toward the Vietnamese patients. She "fuckin' hate them so much that it turns my stomach to have to take care of them." (153) Like many American soldiers in Vietnam she sees the entire Vietnamese population as the enemy, not distinguishing any more between civilians and Vietcong.²⁹⁴ Similar to Van Devanter (*Home* 156-158) and many other nurses, Winnie displays racist attitudes and aggression which are incompatible with her role as nurse.²⁹⁵ Sara Ruddick argues that nursing and caring for others includes also exercise of power and a possibility to realize aggressive behavior: "[...] caregivers are already powerful; they attempt to control people who are, by dint of the caregiving relationship, vulnerable to threats of damage and neglect." (119) This kind of power and aggression is more associated with the warrior role rather than with the nurses' role. (118-122) Nurses were supposed to be "compassionate, nurturing, and fragile." (Mithers 82) Ruddick points out that "to be committed to caregiving work, to be engaged in caregiving labor means, among other things, to count assault or neglect as 'failure.'" (121) Indeed, Winnie feels "shame" because of her aggression toward the Vietnamese patients. "I push it back down where I won't have to look at it." (206)²⁹⁶

²⁹³ Appy argues that these confusing experiences were common for the newly arriving soldiers in Vietnam. See 130-131.

²⁹⁴ See Appy 130-137.

²⁹⁵ See chapter II.2.2. of this study.

²⁹⁶ Many nurses talk about their negative emotions toward their Vietnamese patients. Anne Simon Auger, for example, says: "I was overwhelmed with uncontrollable feelings of hate and rage. I couldn't go near this guy because I knew, without any doubt, that if I touched him, I would kill him. I was shaking from trying to keep my hands off his neck. [...] I discovered I was capable of killing and of violently hating another human being. I had been raised to be a loving and giving person. As a nurse, I had vowed to help all who need it. As a human being I should love my brother, whoever he was. I was forced to confront a side of myself I never dreamed existed before." Santoli 100. See also Diana Dwan Poole's account in Steinman 39

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In hindsight, the narrating I explains the behavior and emotions of the younger self. Smith blames the cultural difference and the insufficient knowledge about the Vietnamese culture for many of the problems between Americans and Vietnamese: "No one has explained that for the Vietnamese not meeting someone's eyes is a sign of respect. Where I come from it's cause to distrust. In war distrust breeds fear, and fear fans anger and contempt." (59)²⁹⁷ The "clash of cultures" (Appy 130) results in mistrust. But "[i]n war lives depend on trust. [...] Where trust is so vital, distrust is a source of loathing. We didn't trust the Vietnamese." (305) In these passages, the narrative distance between narrating and experiencing I becomes clear. As Stanzel argues, "[t]he narrative distance separating the two phases of the narratorial 'I' temporally, spatially, and psychologically, is generally a measure of the intensity of the process of experience and education to which the narrating self was subjected to before it began the narration of its story." (212-213) While Winnie, emeshed in the war situation and the values of war, can not reflect on the reasons for the derisive view of the Vietnamese, the older, more educated Smith can explain the emotions of her younger self from a detached vantage point. This passage exemplifies the psychological distance between Smith and her younger wartime self. But although the change in Smith's personality is obvious, Smith is not estranged from her younger self. Instead, by creating understanding of the experiencing I's emotions and conduct, she emphasizes her psychological development and accomplishes a "convincing psychological integration of the experiencing and narrative self." (Stanzel 213) Finally, a Vietnamese "poet and monk" (351) even becomes the moral authority who takes away her feeling of "shame" (206) and guilt:

"You have seen many awful things, and some were by your own hands," he said. "Do not feel you are the only one responsible. You saw for the whole nation. You suffered for the whole nation." This gentle man watched his villages be bombed over and over again by our forces, yet he has forgiven us. And he gave us a way to forgive ourselves – the most important forgiveness of all. (351)

²⁹⁷ Mary Reynolds Powell, a former Vietnam nurse, analyzes the problems between Vietnamese civilians and the American soldiers in a more political way and sees the cultural misunderstandings only as one part of the problem which is rather systemic than individual: "Though we lived in their land, Americans knew little of the Vietnamese people. [...] The division between us went far beyond language and cultural differences. We did not get to know the Vietnamese because ours was not an alliance of equals. Americans dictated the terms of partnership: while we saved them from communism, the Vietnamese served us." (92)

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Through the forgiveness of the victimized people in Vietnam, Smith is finally able not only to integrate the experiencing I into her psychological growth and development, but also to become reconciled with her former self.

The Military

In contrast to the other autobiographies by female veterans,²⁹⁸ Smith's account does not contain a passage about her experiences in basic training. Instead, she presents herself from the start primarily in a medical rather than a military context. Although three of the pictures she has chosen to illustrate her book show her in a military context at her induction and at promotion ceremonies (183, 189), she presents herself as a nurse and not as a soldier in her narrative. The pictures serve to underline that impression.

The Army is a world of its own, with a language of its own. The men Winnie cares for are not called "patients" but "casualties" in military jargon, an euphemistic expression which suggests accidents by chance rather than suffering and serious medical conditions. Winnie has to learn to decipher the special language of wartime medicine and to understand the "cryptic abbreviations" (17).²⁹⁹ Language on the one hand serves as a device to distinguish the initiated from the uninitiated. On the other hand, the euphemistic expressions are meant to veil the horrible reality with abbreviations like "BKA BLE" of "below-the-knee amputations of both lower extremities" (18). The use of abbreviations, as Paul Fussell observes, also conveys a sense of "maximum efficiency and thoroughly up-to-date methods" (*Wartime* 259).

From the beginning, Winnie exposes Army regulations as ridiculous and not geared towards the real needs and circumstances of a war zone: "[...] I think how absurd it is for us to wear white duty uniforms. The supply room does not carry them, and there is no place to have them repaired [...]." (13) Further, the Army does not care for the female soldiers, so that the "Army store carries nothing especially for

²⁹⁸ Van Devanter 65-80, Hampton 10-31, Wildwind 9-10, Powell 1-2.

²⁹⁹ Similarly, O'Brien describes that he had to learn the special lingo of the Vietnam soldiers (84-85).

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women.” (13)³⁰⁰ Thus, the Army is presented as incompetent and unwilling to care for the soldiers properly. This impression is intensified when soldiers are killed when water-skiing on the Saigon River (73-74) and when the guard at her Saigon quarters is killed by a sniper. (87) Only then the Army provides armed escorts for the nurses to and from work. Winnie comments: “Yeah, sure. What about our coming home from the Redbull Inn at all hours of day and night? Anyway, snipers have no interest in non-warriors. Why bother?” (87) Winnie mockingly imitates the official position of the military, thus creating irony. She accuses the military of misjudging the reality of the war in Vietnam: while the military distinguished between combatants and non-combatants, the Vietnamese did not make that distinction.³⁰¹ “Unable to officially recognize the service of women in Vietnam because of the regulations which required that women serve in non-combatant areas, the military maintained the myth that women served in a support function and were not really ‘in’ the war.” (Christopher 39)

Winnie, as many other nurses, complains about the overwhelming attention of the male soldiers for her, the only “round-eye” (195) around.³⁰² She feels like being “put on the meat market” (129), even watched by Peeping Toms when she visits the bathroom (215), and concludes that “a round-eye is lusted after in this land, no matter how her clothes fit.” (56) But not only fellow male soldiers, also superior officers harass the women sexually:

³⁰⁰ This is a common complaint from female soldiers. As Bates comments, female soldiers “considered themselves lucky if their assigned base had latrines and showers set aside for women and the base exchange carried a supply of feminine hygiene products.” (*Wars* 163)

³⁰¹ Many women experienced being shot at or threatened by enemy attacks on the hospital they worked at. See for example Van Devanter 112-113. But not only nurses, all female American military personnel was constantly threatened. Doris I. “Lucki” Allen, who worked in intelligence, describes the dangers of her work: “I had seen my name on captured enemy documents as one of the persons to be eliminated, and that’s scary.” Walker, 26-27. Judy Jenkins, serving with the Army Special Services, comments: “We women, you know, were noncombatants in a place where we could have gotten killed just as easily as the men. Only we couldn’t shoot back.” Marshall 132. Pinkie Houser describes the situation in Saigon: “You had to be careful when you went to downtown Saigon. Like we’d go down maybe to eat in the Air Force mess hall or something. If you saw a little three- or four-year-old kid, of course you give them a candy bar - that was just something that we did because the little kids liked chocolate. But the little kid could have a satchel on him full of live grenades. If he didn’t know how to pull the pin, they may push him out somewhere in a crowd of GIs, and the kid would explode. Or a lot of times, if they were big enough - five or six years old - they would take it and pull the pin and they would throw it [...]” Marshall 40. See also chapter II.2.2. of this study.

³⁰² See Powell 141-147, or Kathleen Splinter’s story in Steinman 132.

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The presence of 'our' nurses is requested at a party at a big brass villa. We can read between the lines, know this is a command rather than a request. Most of us detest the lecherous old men [...]. Even their lavish air-conditioned villas and savory meals are not worth the insinuating brushes to our breasts and pats to our bottoms, their whispered hints that it would well be worth our time to get away from the crowd. The higher the rank of the leering smile, the more agreeable we're expected to be. (120)

The superior officers misuse their power to pressure the women to comply "to perform" (120) according to their wishes. As Milton Bates argues, "[t]he nurses' experiences therefore lends some support to Susan Brownmiller's argument that rape and the fear of rape govern relationships between the sexes." (Wars 165) Mithers quotes a study in which more than half of the 135 female Vietnam veterans reported to have suffered sexual harassment ranging from insult to rape. (83)³⁰³ Bates states: "The women often felt beleaguered rather than flattered by male attention and sought privacy off duty. They resented being treated as a sexual commodity by older male officers [...]." (Wars 165) When it comes to sexual harassment, Winnie distances herself indiscriminately from all male soldiers, from her "warrior buddies" as well as from the superior officers.³⁰⁴ Concerning this issue, gender really draws the dividing line.

Winnie's experiences let the "seeds of distrust" (58) in the American military, in the conduct of the war and in the honesty of the war managers take root. She begins to listen to people who question the American presence and military tactics in Vietnam (60-61), and she learns first-hand that not only Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army soldiers but also innocent Vietnamese civilians fall victim to American weapons (67). Further, military regulations interfere with patient care:

The inspector general has disallowed our use of silver nitrate, on the ground that it marring the walls and floor with black spots. We explain that patients do much better with silver nitrate than with copper salve, our previous treatment for burns. [...] Where are the scientific papers to that effect? We don't have papers. We know from experience that the patients do better. That's not good enough. The inspector general needs proof. (160)

³⁰³ Bates quotes another study in which 63% of the nurses asked reported "incidents ranging from pranks to threats of military discipline for refusing sex." (Wars 165)

³⁰⁴ In contrast to most of the nurses, a few felt especially respected "because we were nurses – we were kind of on a little bit of a pedestal. Especially with your guys that were in Vietnam, or your staff that were in Vietnam. [...] I don't think that I dealt with as much harassment and discrimination as maybe in another area." (Steinman 51)

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The passage accuses the military of not being interested in giving the best care to the soldiers, similar to Winnie's opinion that the military is not interested in protecting the non-combatants properly. The untagged direct discourse intensifies the ironic effect of this passage, juxtaposing directly the uninformed opinion of Army officers and the advice of experienced medical personnel. Both parties, the official Army and the medical personnel speak with a depersonalized, common voice. Thus, Smith indicates that the contradiction between the Army and the medical personnel is of a fundamental nature, and not a singular occurrence. Soldiers and nurses alike become the victims of the very institution which has the obligation to care for them.

Consequently, Winnie distances herself the military as an institution and the soldiers who run the institution: She feels disdain for the men who are "fighting this war from behind desks – what we term desk jockeys, or Saigon warriors, or rear echelon mother fuckers (REMFs)" (69) The distinguishing line does not run between men and women or non-combatants and combatants but between those managing the war and those having to carry out or suffer the consequences of the decision made by the war managers. Smith clearly joins forces with the men in the field, and distances herself from the war managers, even openly challenging superior officers (129).

The army is not only uncaring, it is also presented as lying to its own soldiers. Information brought through official channels, such as the Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*, is unreliable and the truth cunningly distorted. "According to the *Stars and Stripes*, we're winning battles and our casualties are light. But the scuttlebutt among soldiers is that we're not winning much of anything. And one infantry officer told me that tallies of casualties are based on the total number of men in a battalion. Very tricky. A whole company may be wiped out, but casualties for the battalion are light." (160).³⁰⁵

³⁰⁵ Official military statements were usually written in an euphemistic language. Michael Herr ironically comments on this "cheer-crazed," "obscene" language: "[...] things like 'discreet burst' (one of those tore an old grandfather and two children to bits as they ran along a paddy wall one day, at least according to the report made later by the gunship pilot), 'friendly casualties' (not warm, not fun), 'meeting engagement' (ambush), concluding usually with 17 or 117 or 317 enemy dead and American losses 'described as light'." 179. See also Bates, *Wars* 225-226.

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Winnie's view of the celebrities, civilian REMFs who visit the "showcase hospital" (14) in Saigon is equally unfavorable as her view of the military REMFs. She despises the illusion - with "just the right touch of war zone glamour" (15) – that is put up for the passing-through film stars. In contrast to Japan and the early days in Vietnam, when she relished the images of glamorous warriors and the romanticism of war she now has lost every notion of war as glamorous and romantic. Nancy Sinatra's brief visit on the ward especially enrages Winnie, because Nancy begins to cry and flees from the sight of the wounded.

The last thing these guys need is more worry about how their mothers and sweethearts will react when they get home. [...] I want her to see wounded straight out of the field with pussy wounds or blood pouring, expectants behind the yellow-curtains screen, the body of a soldier you've tried hard to save ready for graves [Graves Registration for dead soldiers, PF]. Then, if she still could, she might have cause to cry. (149)

In this outburst culminate the rage about Sinatra's thoughtless behavior and insensitivity, Winnie's deep frustrations with her difficult working and living conditions, and the defence mechanisms against emotions only fitting for peacetime situations, but not helpful in wartime nursing. It also shows her feeling of being unappreciated: While Sinatra is congratulated for braving the hardships in Vietnam for a short time, Winnie's work and her sufferings are unrecognized. Winnie also emphasizes the difference between Nancy, who is still able to have and to show normal feelings, and herself who is emotionally hardened to be able to do her job. "[...] I don't cry. I never cry anymore." (152)

In contrast to Sinatra's visit, Winnie is happy about Martha Raye's visit of the hospital.³⁰⁶ The famed comedienne, singer and actress is "an exception. I know she's special when I read the insignia on her fatigues, the silver leaf and caduceus of a lieutenant colonel in the Army Nurse Corps." (15) The dress serves as the outside sign of belonging: While Nancy Sinatra wears inappropriate civilian clothes, shoes and makeup, Martha Raye shows her sympathy for and identification with the

³⁰⁶ Martha Raye entertained the troops from 1942 onwards, in the Second World War, Korea, and Vietnam. She visited the troops in Vietnam regularly for nine years, staying with them up to six month. If necessary, she also performed nurses' duties. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her lifetime service to America by President Clinton in 1992. She died in 1994. For more information see: 27. April 2002. <<http://www.userpages.aug.com/captbarb/mraye.html>> In 1995 appeared a biography of her by Noonie Fortin called *Memories of Maggie*.

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soldiers in Vietnam by wearing army fatigues. She sides with the soldiers whom she calls the “nation’s honored heroes” (15) and “the best [boys] in the world” (16). Smith does not distinguish between military personnel and civilians - although Martha Raye wears uniform, she is not a member of the military. Instead, the basic difference lies between those people who have experienced the war firsthand and those who have not, be it military rear-echelon personnel or civilian visitors, men or women.³⁰⁷

After her return to the States, Winnie leaves the army without regret. The institution she was once so eager to join means nothing to her any more: “I feel nothing. [...] I do not look back as I leave my last Army post.” (278)

The Soldiers

Winnie, having always felt lonely and unwanted by her parents as a child, even as “unworthy” of a family (21), is especially attracted by the “strong kinship” among the soldiers and wants to belong. They become not only her “buddies” but even her surrogate family (27). In this family, she plays the roles of mother, girlfriend and sister, according to the respective situation: As a nurse, she has to take care of and supervise the men like a mother (31), after work, she is the center of the “romantic interest” of several soldiers (26) and “everybody’s buddy” as well (35).³⁰⁸

At the point of her narrative when she feels really belonging to her “warrior family,” Smith changes to present tense (27), which she maintains throughout the remainder of the narration. The narrative present signals that the distance between narrating and experiencing I shall appear as removed in the narration. As the diary-like creation of the chapter titles, the concurrent narration creates immediacy and the fiction of synchrony of experience and the narration of these experiences. (Cohn, *Transparent Minds* 210)

³⁰⁷ Smith thus obviously contradicts Michael Herr’s conclusion concerning the Vietnam generation in general: “Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (206). Rather, she distinguishes between those who actually had “been there” and those who had not.

³⁰⁸ Most nurses liked these multiple roles and felt appreciated by their patients. Kathleen Splinter, an Army nurse assigned to the Evacuation Hospital in Chu Lai in 1966-1967, for example, writes: “[The soldiers] appreciated the girls that worked there. They really did. [...] They tried to act better when there were women around. I think the guys appreciated us. They thought of us as sisters or mothers or girlfriends and acted appropriate [...]” Steinman 115-138: 133.

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Despite Winnie's admiration for and feeling of belonging to the "warrior family" (27), she does not identify fully with the male soldiers. In Japan, although caring for war wounded, she is a non-participant in the war and learns about it only indirectly from her warrior friends. Winnie is aware of the distance the war experience puts between them and herself. And after the deaths of friends in Vietnam she finds it increasingly difficult to form close relationships with her warrior friends and concludes that "it is much harder to be buddies with warriors after so many farewells." (37) Thomas Myers' observation about the relationship of men in the line units can also be appropriated for Winnie's experience: "Comradeship in Vietnam proves to be an unstable cooperative relationship, trust and dependence always balanced by a necessary psychological distance." (*Walking Point* 85)³⁰⁹ Also, her view of her warrior buddies changes and becomes more sober and realistic: She sees them no longer as glamorous "heroes, but as survivors." (37) Her change is further visible in the language Winnie uses: She describes Tom's death in the onomatopoeic and euphemistic language derived from the Second World War that was used in Vietnam: "Tom got zapped." (36)³¹⁰ The use of Vietnam jargon serves as a means to remove the distance between narrating and experiencing I. It conveys the impression of immediacy and authenticity for the reader. The use of Vietnam lingo recreates a common function of it for the soldiers: it enables Winnie to distance herself from the death of her boyfriend and to avoid confronting the horrible reality of his death directly at the time when it happened.

In Japan, Winnie tries to build a personal relationship with her patients. She learns to deal with the special needs of combat wounded (29) and begins "to know them as men instead of wounds." (30) In Vietnam, however, Winnie soon learns that she has to distance herself emotionally from the casualties to be able to function properly. She feels like having a "veneer coating my heart" (134) and asks herself: "Whatever happened to the nurse in Japan who cared about patients as people, not just as wounds? The nurse who didn't give them Seconal to keep them quiet?" (136) The presentation of the experiencing I's thoughts in the interior monologue is a means to enforce the impression of immediacy: "Realistic presentation of consciousness

³⁰⁹ See also chapter III.1. of this study.

³¹⁰ "Zapped" appeared in the English language in 1942. The word imitates the sound made by a gun. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* 1370.

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seems to require the illusion of immediacy, that is, the apparent suspension of mediacy, more than does presentation of external events.” (Stanzel 127) The voice of the narrating I is not audible in the interior monologue. The immediacy enhances identification and “sympathy” with the experiencing I. (Stanzel 127) It also creates understanding for Winnie’s coping strategies which are indicated in the following sentence: “I turn away from those questions, busy myself with cleaning out the medication cabinet and tidying the nursing station.” (136) An ironic counterpoint to Winnie’s experiences is provided by the letters of her mother who states that “with the way things are going [in the U.S, PF] I really think it would be a pleasure to stay in Viet Nam for a while to get away from world problems.” (122)

The way Winnie feels is further changed by several severely burned soldiers she has to deal with. When one of them dies, she feels relief: ”Guiltily I realize that I’m grateful that he is dead. I’ve traded my soul for one less soldier to worry about.” (158) She feels as if she had made a pact with the ultimate evil and sold the immortal part of her being. As Christopher argues, the nurses’ “role as caretakers forced them to subordinate their own need to the needs of others.” (38) In direct opposition to her role, Winnie buys this little bit of time and less worries at the expense of another human being’s life. Her relief at the soldier’s death, however, leaves her feeling guilty. The chapter title “My Soul for a Soldiers Life” (155), emphasizing what she should have done according to her role, provides an ironic contrast to what she actually feels.

Due to her experiences she can now understand the combat soldiers’ attitudes and their ”thousand-yard stare: Suddenly I understand that look. It’s a retreat from too much pain. It puts a safe distance between the pain and the soldier.” (213) But for Winnie, there is no “safe distance” from pain, only temporal relief in the quiet underwater world of the swimming pool which has become her ”haven from insanity.” (201) In contrast to her former self, the “gung-ho supporter of the war” (”American Daughter,” *Kirkus Reviews*), Winnie now states: “My gung ho days are over. No matter how busy the ward may get, I’ll take any time I can away from the war.” (219) As the seasoned combat soldier who is no longer ”gung ho,” the seasoned combat nurse has lost all idealized notions about war, healing and caring for the patients. But although she can distance herself spatially from the war, she

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can not distance herself psychologically from her experiences. "I think of how eager I was for this week. Now I'm relieved that it's over. I just can't seem to be happy anywhere anymore." (225)

Finally, Winnie has to distance herself completely from the casualties on her ward to be able to function. She avoids to perceive them as individuals: "I ignore the block letters over pockets in case there's one I'll recognize. [...] I don't look at their faces; it might interfere with what I'm doing." (235) Emotions are neither important nor helpful, empathy no longer a virtue. She has become emotionally numb: she even wants a dying soldier to die faster: "Fuck, what's taking him so long? We need that space." (235) In contrast to earlier months in Vietnam, when she tried to stay with the dying soldiers so they would not die alone, she is now beyond compassion. The only factor that counts is efficiency. She has become cynical, unemotional, but doing her duty to the best of her abilities. She has lost the ability to feel compassion for another human being, and that loss buys her a little peace of mind. Nevertheless, combat nursing turns out also to be professionally challenging and rewarding. Winnie learns to perform the tasks of doctors (142). She also gains high professional skills and "something of a reputation of a supernurse [...]." (198) Thus, her professional experiences are ambivalent: while she loses the ability to empathize with her patients, she becomes highly skilled and capable.³¹¹

Family

After her return from Vietnam, the relationship with her parents proves to be difficult from the start. Winnie is upset with her parents' occupation with what seems to her unimportant matters. (280) She gives up trying to please her parents by living up to their expectations. Her behavior is inexplicable for herself, at night she "lie[s] awake wondering what's wrong with me." (249) Her parents' house can not provide a safe haven from nightmares and depressions. In contrast to Vietnam where she felt that she was at home, she does not "belong here, no longer think, feel, or believe as they do [...]." (279) Winnie's language learned in Vietnam, - she uses the word "shit" - deeply offends her mother because "[n]o woman in my family ever swears." (252) The "collision of disparate worlds," as Bates states, "is the point of a frequently

³¹¹ Many nurses talk about the high professional skills they gained during her tour in Vietnam. See for example Marshall 228, or Walker 17.

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recounted bit of Vietnam folklore: the veteran is welcomed home with a lavish meal; all goes well until the veteran asks another member of the family, usually the mother, to 'please pass the fucking salt.'" (*Wars* 225)³¹² On the one hand, the story can be interpreted as making fun of the veteran because he forgets where he is and lapses into wartime habits. On the other hand, Bates argues following Freud, the joke is also at the family's expense. "It consciously rehearses the unconscious aggression of the veteran's original slip of the tongue. The obscenity is an affront to the social milieu of 'please pass'; the storyteller and his or her audience, taking the side of the veteran, enjoy the family's discomfort." (*Wars* 225) Smith thus uses her lapse as a means of direction of her readers' sympathies. The reader, after having followed Winnie's experiences during her year in Vietnam, sides with her rather than with the mother.

Winnie feels in limbo after her return from Vietnam: She is not able to decide what to do, despite her parents' demand to "get on with your life." (282) Since she feels unwelcome, she leaves her parents' house and consequently avoids personal contact with them. (346) Even after she has undergone therapy and is able to talk about her war-related problems, her mother does not believe her. She "not only can't understand but accuses me of using Vietnam as excuse for my failures. The real problem, she maintains, is that I'm lazy, or I would have done better with my nursing career. And I'm boring or I would have a man by now." (303-304) Instead of providing the unjudgmental audience the traumatized veteran needs (Shay 188-189), she judges her daughter according to her own standards as a failure. Nevertheless, finally Winnie is reconciled with her mother. They reach a mutual understanding: "She finally believed that Vietnam could affect me after so many years, and I finally understood how painful it had been for her to see me changed so much by the war." (350)

Her father, a veteran of the Second World War, in contrast, tries to encourage her and defends her against her mother's accusations. (341) But, as Winnie notices, "he can't understand why that year in Vietnam has come back to haunt me so long after." (303) While he was able to forget or at least repress his memories, he can not understand why Winnie is still affected by hers. Winnie speculates that this

³¹² See Van Devanter who also tells a similar story: *Home* 256.

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difference is due to the different homecomings the veterans from the Second World War and from Vietnam received: "Could our homecomings be the reason? The fact that he was never told that he deserved losing his leg for being fool enough to go to war in the first place?" (302) Thus, she assigns responsibility for the veterans' problems to American society who not only failed to welcome the soldiers but even told them that their problems were well-deserved. She thus constructs a common victim identity for the veterans.

War Stories

Winnie soon learns that neither her parents nor her relatives are interested in her actual experiences in Vietnam. Her attempt to tell her parents about her patients fails when her mother cuts her short: "'Nobody wants to hear that stuff,' my mother interrupts firmly. Then, to my blank silence: 'Some things are better left unsaid.'" (251) And her aunt bluntly tells her that "people don't want to hear about sorrows. They have enough of their own." (257) She learns to censor her stories according to the standards of social acceptability. When interviewed on a TV show about her tour of duty, she only gives a sanitized and family-compatible account of her experiences: "I say gunshot wounds, burn wounds, head wounds, blast wounds. I don't say bellies full of pus, or crispy critters, or blown-off arms and legs, or fixed and dilated pupils left to die alone." (265) She conforms to the expectations of her interviewer, although she feels they are wrong. She wants to tell her true experiences but no one is interested in them: "The interviewer would think it too political. Families might not be ready to hear it. Besides, no one wants to hear about that stuff." (265) Bates argues that women veterans were in a special situation: "On the one hand, they felt alienated by their experiences in Vietnam, and this made it harder for them to find a receptive audience. On the other hand, they also felt alienated from their experiences." (*Wars* 168) Smith's autobiography, then, serves a double purpose: first, the reader provides the receptive audience for her war stories. Second, in the process of writing she reclaims her experiences as a part of her development, thus reintegrating them into her life-story.

Professional Relationships

After the professional challenges of war nursing, the work in civilian hospitals is tedious and frustrating. (283, 285) "On top of that I'm terribly frustrated by the

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restrictions on my authority.” (286) Similar to Van Devanter and other nurses, Winnie finds it difficult to adjust to the normal hospital hierarchy and to the devaluation of her professional skills.³¹³ As psychologist Shad Meshad argues, nurses in Vietnam felt as a failure because the wounded died despite the best possible care was administered to them. (MacPherson, *Long Time Passing* 449) Back in the States, however, Winnie is regarded as a failure just because she administers the best care possible to the patients without regard to the hospital hierarchy. She feels

terribly frustrated by the restrictions on my authority. If someone needs blood, I have to get a doctor's order. If a fresh post-op dressing needs changing, I have to call a doctor. If someone is ready to get out of bed, I have to check with a doctor. And the doctors are interns, less experienced than I am, so they frequently have to check with their residents before they can grant me permission. (186)

Especially the attitudes and values of her fellow nurses and doctors are unacceptable for her. She can neither feel sympathy for the complaints of the staff nor compassion for the patients:

Then a ninety-year-old man with complications from an appendectomy is admitted to the ICU. I think of the soldiers in Vietnam – those who are still being put aside to die because of the lack of space or staff even to try to save them – and it infuriates me. Shortly after a nineteen-year-old with a traumatic amputation [...] is admitted, and the staff showers him with pity – but I can't feel sorry. It's only one leg and below the knee at that, a small loss compared with what nineteen-year-olds in Vietnam are losing every day. (286)

Winnie's frame of reference is always Vietnam. Her “perception of hard work, of exhaustion, of tragedy is forever changed.” (119) Further, she feels “guilt at how easy” her work is compared to the wards in Vietnam. (286) Finally, she decides against continuing her nursing career because “there has to be something in my life to keep me going, and nursing isn't it.” (287)

American Society

American society is depicted as uncaring and disinterested in the veterans. “Caught in the middle are the returning warriors. Everyone is too busy taking sides or going on with his or her life as if there were no war to pay attention to.” (280) When attention is paid to the veterans at all, it is “the wrong kind” (280): the revelation of

³¹³ See also Van Devanter, *Home* 266, who also tells about similar experiences.

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the My Lai massacre leads to a condemnation of American soldiers as murderers of innocent civilians. Winnie sees the soldiers as the victims of an uncaring, even hostile society which refuses to deal with the problems or special needs of returning Vietnam veterans. The news of the massacre at My Lai result in an ambiguous reactions: "When the news break, I sit dazedly in front of the TV, reeling from the conflict within me. One part is sickened by the slaughter, but another part understands what happened: that collective hatred can explode in such an atrocity." (280). In contrast to those Americans who have not experienced war firsthand, she is able to understand the causes of the emotional strains which led to the massacre. Her choice of words to describe the event - "slaughter" and "atrocity" – makes clear that she does not try to exculpate the soldiers or to downplay the cruelty and horridness of the events. Nevertheless, she takes sides with the combat soldiers of My Lai against the American civilians who have no first-hand knowledge about the war and now accuse the soldiers they have sent to fight a "dirty war" in Vietnam: "[...] inside I scream at those who condemn the lieutenant in charge at My Lai. I'd like them to get off their self-righteous asses and learn about war firsthand. I want them to be terrified for their lives day in and day out, to watch a couple of buddies get blown to pieces and then see how long they can hang on to their high-and-mighty ideals." (280) This passage echoes O'Brien's sarcastic comment:

Those who point at and degrade [the soldier's] bitterness, those who declare it's all a part of war and that this is his job which must be done – to those patriots I will recommend a post-war vacation to [Vietnam], where they can swim in the sea, lounge under a fine sun, stroll in the quaint countryside, wife and son in hand. Certainly there will be a mine or two still in the earth. Alpha Company did not detonate all of them. (*If I Die* 130)

Neither moralizing idealism nor dismissal of the soldiers' emotions with a disinterested shrug are adequate reactions to the warrior's experiences. Non-combatants are not allowed to judge the behavior of soldiers under circumstances of war because they have not experienced war themselves. While male and female veterans are united through their war experience, they are divided from the non-combatants. Finally, confronted with the ongoing political discussions about the war, Winnie refuses to discuss the war with non-veterans. She concludes, that although she agrees that the "war is a mistake, [...] I can't agree that the warriors are somehow to blame. I'm antiwar but prowarrior." (288)

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Veterans

In the vet center, Winnie finds sympathetic and knowledgeable female Vietnam veterans who understand what she goes through. Slowly, Winnie begins to deal with her problems and realizes how and why Vietnam has changed her. And she discovers common traits with her fellow veterans in the rap group:

In a country where youth is adored, we lost ours before we were out of our twenties. We learned to accept death there, and it erased our sense of immortality. We met our human frailties, the dark side of ourselves, face-to-face, and learned that brutality, mutilation, and hatred all are forgivable. At the same time, we learned guilt for all those things. The war destroyed our faith, betrayed our trust, and dropped us outside the mainstream of our society. (308)

The war experience results in ambivalent, even contradicting emotions: on the one hand, she knows that in war the “human frailties” are forgivable; on the other hand, she is not able to forgive herself. Although she does not exculpate the veterans, she nevertheless emphasizes that the veterans are also victims of war. She also discovers that her problems and experiences are not specific to her gender: the male veterans whose group she joins suffer from similar problems and difficulties. (319-310) Again, the war experiences unite the veterans across gender lines. Talking to male vets, she discovers that

the emotions we experienced that year were much the same. And we all survived the same way, by numbing ourselves to what was asked of us. The swallowed their fear in order to face the enemy. I buried compassion to face the wounded. Back in the world with hearts desensitized and minds numb, we shut out the horrors of the war zone and turmoil on the home front and our self-administered anesthesia has been wearing off in variable times. (322)

Winnie underlines the similarity of experiences, emotions and strategies of coping with the daily stresses and strains of the war zone. She proposes a common identity of all soldiers, male or female, who went to Vietnam. All non-veterans are regarded as outsiders and excluded from the ‘warrior family.’ (25) Winnie thus returns to a common bond similar to that she adhered to in Japan. But while in Japan she had only begun to be a part of the group of soldiers, she now belongs to the “warrior family” of Vietnam veterans.

Reconciliation

A dream finally brings Winnie the veteran and her younger, more inexperienced self together:

I dream I'm with another nurse, standing on the roof of Claymore Tower in Saigon [...] The other nurse has a boyfriend based here. She's crying, shivering in a chilly night wind on the roof. I hold her in my arms, rocking and swaying to comfort her. "Sometimes," I say, "I think it's better if we don't know what's going on while we're here." Then, staring at the empty camp: "Maybe it'll be easier when we get back to the States." When I awaken, I understand that both nurses were myself, the woman I am today comforting the girl I used to be. (312)

In this dream, the younger self is reconciled with the older one. Winnie is not only able to understand the change in herself but also to accept it. She can now regard the Vietnam experiences as part of her development from "girl" to "woman." She literally embraces her former self, by this gesture indicating the mending of the disruptions in her self-perception.

Both the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the homecoming parade in New York complete her process of coming to terms with her war experiences. The parade, "our long awaited dream come true" (345) confirms the willingness of American society to appreciate the service of Vietnam veterans and to integrate them into the community of Americans. The close community of veterans assembled in Washington renews the feeling of belonging Winnie has failed to find at her parents' house and in American society. Finally, she is appreciated for what she has done in Vietnam not only as part of the group of Vietnam veterans but also on a personal level: "Tears well up when this warrior thanks us for saving his leg, when another says his buddy was hit and thanks us for saving his life, when one says his brother was in Army hospitals from Vietnam to Japan to stateside and is here today – thanks to Army nurses. All would be *proud* do have us join them." (344) The feeling of being a failure because "no matter what [the nurses] did the GIs kept dying" (MacPherson, *Long Time Passing* 449) is finally replaced by the recognition of her service as crucial for the survival of others by other veterans, the only persons who have a right to judge her. Thus, Winnie is not only integrated in a common survivor-victim identity together with her "warrior buddies" but also

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reintegrated into American society in a position that is apt to command authority and respect.

V. GENDER MATTERS? – The Autobiographies in Comparative Perspective

In the present chapter, I will proceed beyond the individual analysis of the respective autobiographical accounts and relate the different texts to each other. By comparing the narratives by O'Brien and Caputo with those by Van Devanter and Smith, I will discuss the question whether gender can be regarded as an important category for the self-definition and presentation of the respective authors' selves. I will also ask if it is possible to discern a specific *écriture féminine* in the selected women's war writings.

O'Brien's and Caputo's autobiographies describe briefly their authors' youth and upbringing and then focus extensively on the military education, the tour of duty in Vietnam and the war experiences. The narratives close with the end of their tour of duty, except for Caputo's brief synoptic "Epilogue" (321-328) and the "Postscript" from 1996 (347-356). Van Devanter's and Smith's narratives deal additionally with the life after the war, the return home and the ensuing problems concerning the relationship to family and friends, the professional environment, and the reintegration into American society which was not willing to recognize women as veterans, let alone to deal with the special problems of female veterans. Due to the narratives' focus on the participation in war, the accounts of O'Brien and Caputo can be classified as "autobiographical war writings." (Vernon 603) In contrast, the female veterans' writings belong to the broader category of military autobiography because they also integrate the aftermath of the war. (Vernon 603)

The narrative structure of O'Brien's autobiographical account deviates from mere chronological narration. The book begins with a proleptic chapter set in Vietnam, about six months into Tim's tour of duty. The second chapter goes back in time to describe Tim's youth in rural mid-western Minnesota. The third chapter adds Tim's military education in boot camp. The fourth chapter, "Nights," again set in Vietnam, complements the first chapter, "Days." The Vietnam chapters embrace those set in the United States. Thus, O'Brien expresses through the structure of his narrative his conviction that the events and actions of the soldiers abroad are intricately connected to the military education at home. The ensuing chapters are narrated chronologically; they focus on the war experiences.

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In contrast to O'Brien, Caputo structures his narrative chronologically, except for his "Prologue," which can be regarded as a synopsis of his convictions and views about the war and its consequences for the American men who fought in it. Instead of constructing a continuous plot, Caputo inserts brief snapshot-like passages narrated in present tense to represent the unconnected flashes of memories he has of that time. He thus resists the autobiographer's temptation to depict himself as "being in full command of our knowledge of our selves and stories [...]" (Eakin, *Lives* ix). Rather, he presents the war as the cause for ruptures in his life-story.

Lynda Van Devanter and Winnie Smith's autobiographies show striking similarities concerning the form and structure of the accounts: Both narratives start with a proleptic chapter *in medias res*, which outlines the main topics of the respective narrative. From the second chapter onwards, the narration proceeds chronologically from the childhood through the tour of duty in Vietnam to the time when the autobiography is written. In contrast to Caputo, Van Devanter affirmatively presents herself as in full command of her story. Despite her statement that she is not able to fully remember her time in Vietnam (ix), she constructs her narrative - except for the first chapter - as a chronologically unfolding plot, which gives no indication of memory gaps. Smith's narrative also proceeds chronologically. Thus, both women depict their different stages of their personal development as causally connected. Gymnich argues, "daß eine chronologische Darstellung verschiedener Phasen der Identitätsentwicklung grundsätzlich dazu geeignet ist, eine Progression zu verdeutlichen und kausale Verknüpfungen zwischen einzelnen Phasen anzudeuten." (82) The culmination point of the personal development is the successful reintegration into American society, and both Van Devanter and Smith end their narratives when this reintegration is completed. In contrast to the "female *bildungsroman*," which is characterized by a circular pattern, and in which the female initiation takes place "through learning the rituals of human relationships at home, so that [the heroines] may replicate the lives of their mothers" (Ferguson, quoted in Gymnich 87), both female authors construct their narratives similarly to the plot of the male *bildungsroman* which emphasizes a linear progressive development and spatial mobility as well as the severing of interpersonal relationships. (Frieden 304) Rita Felski defines this kind of female self-discovery narratives as "feminist

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Bildungsroman” which is characterized “by a historical and linear structure; female self-discovery and emancipation is depicted as a process of moving outward into the public realm of social engagement and activity [...]” (127)

As I have stated in my introductory chapter, *écriture féminine* is defined as “mehrdeutig und widersprüchlich, fragmentarisch mit offenen Strukturen, voller Leerstellen und nicht-realistisch [...]” (Würzbach, “Einführung” 146). The notion of female writing as non-linear and discontinuous is not applicable for Van Devanter’s and Smith’s narratives. Both women’s narratives, in contrast, adhere to the developmental and structural pattern of the feminist *bildungsroman*, which is similar to those of the classic male *bildungsroman*. Rather, O’Brien’s autobiography partly presents a circularly constructed plot, which is more associated with the female *bildungsroman* than with the linear progression of the male one. Caputo’s narrative is partly fragmented, with breaks and discontinuities. According to Hélène Cixous, *écriture féminine* is not related to the sex of the author. My finding underline that the structural patterns associated with female writing are not specific to the sexes but may be found in writings by male as well as by female authors.

Both O’Brien and Caputo use intertextual references to position themselves into a distinct literary tradition and to test literary and cultural models against the war experience of Vietnam. In their search for an appropriate new frame of reference for the war and for their war experiences, both authors consult literary, philosophical, and religious texts rooted in the Western cultural tradition. O’Brien and Caputo “forge a version of immediate history by testing this war against universal propositions of courage and proper action.” (Myers 89) But these propositions fail to provide valid models for the perception of the war in Vietnam. By being able to take recourse to many different philosophical, religious, and literary texts, both authors present themselves as learned and well-read writers. In contrast to their male peers, Van Devanter does not use references to literature or cultural models. Smith refers to Van Devanter’s narrative exclusively and only as the trigger for her preoccupation with her Vietnam experience and the ensuing problems. In contrast to their male counterparts, both female authors do not define themselves as writers. For them, writing is a form of personal therapy, a means to come to terms with their experiences. Van Devanter also wants her story to be regarded as example and

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encouragement for other veterans whom she shows the possibility to overcome the war-related problems. She goes beyond her private development and presents herself as actively participating in a public role as lobbyist for women veterans. Smith, in contrast, does not relate to her professional occupation; rather, she identifies herself at the end of her narrative primarily as mother. She also integrates a picture of herself and her son into her book. In this regard, Natascha Würzbach's description of the female *bildungsroman* which deals primarily with the development of "Erlebnisfähigkeit und innerer Selbständigkeit" ("Einführung" 147) fits especially Smith's narrative. However, Smith's book does not fit into the pattern of Ferguson's female *bildungsroman*. She does not 'come back to' or recreate the old female stereotype of motherhood, political abstinence, and quietism that shies away from taking public responsibilities. Rather, she presents herself as combining public activities in women veterans groups and as a writer with her private life as a mother.

Nancy Chodorow states: "The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate. [...] Masculine personality, then, comes to be defined more in terms of denial of relationship and connection [...], whereas feminine personality comes to include a fundamental definition of self in relationship." (169) These fundamental differences concerning the definition of the feminine and the masculine self are recognizable in the narratives of the male and female veterans. O'Brien and Caputo search for standards by which they can define themselves and their role in the war. "They not only compare and contrast, but also take the reader outward on a personal voyage and return homeward with collective news." (Myers 76) They are much less concerned with interpersonal relations than their female peers. Van Devanter and Smith present themselves primarily in their relationships to others, be it their patients, their fellow soldiers, their families at home or the veterans' community. Again, this categories are not to be taken as absolute; for the male soldiers, the intimate bond with the fellow soldiers in their units provide an important means of group identification.

All four authors share a similar cultural background: they come from white, middle-class families. Caputo, Van Devanter and Smith are Catholics. Both Van Devanter and Smith come from politically conservative families. A sense of patriotic

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obligation toward their country, adventure, the wish to help the soldiers in Vietnam, and notions of war derived from Hollywood films about the Second World War lead them to volunteer for Vietnam. O'Brien and Caputo join the war in Vietnam from different starting positions: O'Brien is a reluctant draftee who decides to participate in a war he regards as morally wrong because he feels the obligation to fulfill the expectations of his family and hometown and fears the social ostracism of desertion. In contrast, Caputo, a professional soldier and Marine officer, is eager for the adventure of war. For both male authors the mythologized versions of the Second World War as depicted in popular Hollywood movies as well as the frontier myths of American popular culture provide the initial frame of reference for the perception of the Vietnam war.

For many male soldiers the frontier myth as depicted in books and films served as a frame of reference for the Vietnam war. In his book *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin points out that "American troops would be describing Vietnam as "'Indian country' and search-and-destroy missions as a game of 'Cowboys and Indians'." (3) Kennedy's New Frontier is perceived by and familiarized for the soldiers in the language and symbolism of a mythologized version of the Old Frontier. But while male veterans often refer to John Wayne and use the imagery borrowed from western films to describe their war experience in their accounts,³¹⁴ the frontier mythology does not serve as a reference point in women's autobiographies. Neither Smith nor Van Devanter use frontier imagery to relate their experiences. One reason for the notably lesser appeal of western films for female soldiers may be the fact that the films offered next to no identification figures for military women. Those films depicted no military women, only military wives because there were of course no military women in the 19th-century 'Wild West.' Women portrayed in Army westerns, for example in the movies *Fort Apache* and *Rio Grande*, both starring John Wayne, were often in the beginning strongly "against the authority of the army" and converted to good soldier's wives during the film. In contrast, the male characters "speak eloquently of the army and what it means, and they attain heroism by living up to the spirit as well as the letter of their oaths of duty" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 357-358). Women

³¹⁴ For a detailed account of the use of the frontier imagery in Vietnam see Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 489-623. See also Bates, *Wars* 9-47, and chapter II.2.I of this study.

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obviously did not identify with male characters either, perhaps because their own roles as non-combatant, and as caring and nurturing nurse were defined essentially different from that of the fighting male soldiers.

Of the selected authors, Caputo is the only one to present himself as initially enthusiastic about the military. The mythology of the Marine Corps provides the sense of adventure and romanticism he searches for in war. In contrast, O'Brien, Van Devanter and Smith distance themselves from the military as an institution. O'Brien perceives himself as superior to his fellow draftees, and regards the army as an institution which brutalizes the soldiers. Both Van Devanter and Smith present themselves primarily as medical and not as military personnel from the start. Despite the differences concerning the war experiences of male and female soldiers, they result for all four authors in severance from their former selves, in loss of values and in change of perceptions. In a similar process of gradual disillusionment with and estrangement from the cultural framework they grew up in, they lose their familiar reference points and former convictions in Vietnam. The world of war is severed from life as they knew it in the States. Caputo, Van Devanter and Smith, who voluntarily joined the military and the war, emphasize their feeling that the patriotism, idealism and readiness to sacrifice a year of their lives for freedom and democracy has been betrayed by the military as well as by the irresponsible American government. For all four author's the experiences with the military during their tour in Vietnam lead to a disdain for the institution: the military is regarded as uncaring, ignorant and disinterested in the ordinary soldiers. The conduct of the war leads to no results but the senseless deaths of American soldiers. Both female authors underline the fact that the Army did not sufficiently care for female soldiers. As Milton Bates points out, the military women in Vietnam "considered themselves lucky if their assigned base had latrines and showers set aside for women and the base exchange carried a supply of feminine hygiene products." (*Wars* 163)

The disregard for the needs of female soldiers finds its parallel in the use of language. Linguistically, the military identifies the female soldiers as men. "To become a soldier is to acquire masculinity, even if one happens to be biologically female." (Bates, *Wars* 141) The male soldiers, in contrast, are affirmed in their masculinity by being taught to shed all 'female' sides. Although both women

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critically comment on the military's attitude towards female soldiers, they nevertheless become "masculine" regarding the language they use: As the male soldiers, women use expletives and the specific jargon of the field soldiers in Vietnam. Van Devanter and Smith integrate this language into their respective narrative. The mind styles of Van Devanter's and Smith's wartime selves serve as a means to underline the identification of Van Devanter and Smith with the male combat soldiers. As Reingard Nischik argues, "Mentalstile transportieren [...] über die spezifische Wahl sprachlicher Elemente (z.B. in Bezug auf Wortwahl, Satzstruktur) implizit Bedeutungen, die Rückschlüsse auf Einstellungen bzw. mentale Befindlichkeiten des Sprachträgers zulassen." (4) The Vietnam jargon and the use of obscene language serve various functions:

First, it lays claim to narrative authority. [...] many use obscenity to reinforce the claim to firsthand knowledge. Second, obscenity challenges any opposite claims to authority that are couched in a centripetal discourse. The most tempting target is the managerial view of the war, whose speech is characterized by euphemism, abstraction, technological jargon, circular reasoning, and willful optimism. (Bates, *Wars* 225)

For both women, language serves not only as a distancing device, but also as a means to underline their identification with the combat soldiers. The common enemy is, next to the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army, the own military command and the "rear echelon motherfuckers." The distinction between participants and non-participants, and even more between soldiers who manage the war in the rear echelons and soldiers who have to execute the manager's decisions is the most important distinction for male as well as for female soldiers. Mithers states, "[w]omen who'd spent a year in combat boots and blood-and-mud stained fatigues working at or near the front weren't clichéd, self-sacrificing Florence Nightingales or breathy, bouncing Hot Lips Houlihans." Rather, she concludes, "[o]ne name that might have suited them was 'soldier' – certainly someone who'd worked around the clock in an operating room that was sometimes under fire, numbing her emotions while piecing together burned and mangled bodies had exhibited strength, courage, endurance, toughness, and lack of squeamishness in large measure." (87)

A significant difference between O'Brien's and Caputo's narratives on the one hand and Van Devanter's and Smith's on the other is the latter's attention to forms of

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sexual harassment. The female soldiers complain of being sexually harassed by their peers as well as by superior officers. Bates states that the “nurses experiences therefore lends some support to Susan Brownmiller’s argument that rape and the fear of rape govern relations between the sexes in a war.” (*Wars* 165) Due to my findings, I would qualify Brownmiller’s statement. Van Devanter and Smith foreground their close relationship with their fellow soldiers and not the fear of sexual harassment or rape. Thus, while the fear of rape is surely an important part of the women’s war experiences, it is not the principle that governs the relationships between men and women, as they are described by both female authors.³¹⁵

Mithers describes the “mythology of war” as drawing a line between men’s and women’s experiences: “[...] the warrior, a man who kills, who sees himself holding the ‘power of life and death,’ can imagine himself a god. The woman who has seen warriors weeping and calling ‘Mommy!,’ who knows that in the end war comes down to blood, pain, and broken bodies, can only remind him that he is not.” (88) But neither O’Brien and Caputo nor Van Devanter and Smith fit this stereotypical image of male and female soldiers. Far from regarding themselves as “gods,” O’Brien and Caputo struggle with questions of guilt and morality. Not only the armed male soldiers, but also Van Devanter and Smith hold power over life and death in their profession as nurses. Their war experience cannot be reduced to “blood, pain and broken bodies.” Rather, the nurses experience themselves as professionally capable, as strong and able to work under the worst conditions. They also confess to feeling rage and hate for the enemy, even the desire to kill enemy soldiers, emotions hardly in line with the image of the caring and suffering nurse. Sara Ruddick explains that the role of caregiver contains also the execution of power which is generally rather associated with the combat soldier’s role. (118-122)

In contrast to O’Brien and Caputo, both female soldiers also relate their experiences after their return from Vietnam. They feel alienated from their families and friends, are unable to lead a stable life personally and professionally. Both women have to learn that their Vietnam experiences are neither valid nor welcome in post-war

³¹⁵ While a few studies deal with sexual violence against military women, there is not study to date which deals with the rape of male soldiers by their peers or by superior officers. This topic seems to be even more taboo than the rape of female soldiers by their male comrades.

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American society. For both female veterans therapy provides the means to come to terms with their experiences.

The comparison of the autobiographies shows striking similarities in terms of both war experience and relationships. All four authors undergo a similar development of gradual disillusionment and alienation from values and opinions they adhered to before the war. They distance themselves from the military as an institution, from the non-participants and the war managers. Instead, they identify only with their fellow soldiers. The gender gap is less deep and less significant than the gap between non-participants and managers of war on the one side, and nurses and combat soldiers on the other. Bates argues that women's stories resemble closely those of many male veterans, "which should give pause to anyone who believes that the female experience of war is essentially different from the male." (*Wars* 164) The theory of *écriture féminine* has proven to be not fitting to Van Devanter's and Smith's autobiographies. A special form of female war writing is not discernible in the selected texts. For the four autobiographies analyzed in this study, it is possible to conclude that female identity and soldier identity are not opposed to each other but can be integrated similar to the way male soldiers can integrate their wartime self in their identity. Bates concludes: "War, though it has often divided the sexes, may serve in the recounting to bring them together in a recognition of their shared, intricate humanity [...]." ("Men, Women, and Vietnam" 56)

VI. THE SCAR THAT BINDS – Veterans' Autobiographies in the Context of the Public Discourse about the Vietnam War in the United States³¹⁶

As I have demonstrated in chapter II.3. of this study, the discourse about the war and the public perception of the veterans changed fundamentally in the years between the end of the war in Vietnam in 1973 and the Gulf War in 1991. The stereotype of the veteran changed: while the veterans in the 70s were still regarded as 'baby-killers,' they gradually came to be seen as victims, survivors, and patriotic heroes during the 80s and 90s. After the in-depth literary analyses and the comparison of the selected autobiographies, I will now open the focus to a more historical perspective and try to point out parallels, similarities and differences between the autobiographies and the public perception of the war and the veterans. Reviews of the autobiographical accounts provide insights in the reception and interpretation of the autobiographies and their integration in the public discourse about the war.

Tim O'Brien's autobiography appeared in 1973, at a time when the Vietnam war was drawing to a close. The reviews emphasize three points in O'Brien's narrative, which can be regarded as parallel to the public discourse in the Seventies. In the early 70s war-weary American society had not yet arrived at a unified and unifying interpretation of the Vietnam war. (Beattie 8) This inconclusiveness can also be traced in O'Brien's autobiography. Throughout his narrative, he searches for a model to make sense out of the war experience and tries out literary, religious, and philosophical works from earlier wars and earlier times. But they are unable to provide an adequate model for the perception of the Vietnam war. For O'Brien, as the anonymous reviewer of *The New Yorker* points out, "the experience [...] resembled a philosophy course only in its inconclusiveness." (July 16, 1973)

After the discovery of the My Lai massacre and other American atrocities in the late 60s and early 70s as well as the disclosure of war crimes by the veterans themselves in the "Winter Soldier Investigations" in 1971, the American public came to see the soldiers primarily as victimizers. The moral justification for the involvement in

³¹⁶ The quote is borrowed from the title of Keith Beattie's book *The Scar That Binds*.

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Vietnam and the individual soldier's responsibility for his or her actions were widely debated. In the public view, the soldiers were often viewed as cold-blooded killers. O'Brien deals with the issue of his own responsibility and his complicity in a war he considers to be morally wrong. He regards himself as a victimizer and a victim at the same time and admits responsibility for atrocities against Vietnamese civilians. In line with the public view of the soldier as victimizer, the anonymous reviewer in the *Kirkus Reviews* singles out the "off-handed descriptions of legs being blown off and gooks wasted" and calls the book O'Brien's "apologia pro vita sua." (March 1, 1973)

But the autobiography is more than just a personal apology. O'Brien also describes the mismanagement of the war by the American military and the brutalizing effects of the conduct of the war. The reviewer of *The New Yorker* comments: "[O'Brien] did not believe in the necessity and rightness of the war he wound up fighting, and everything he tells us about its management gives the impression that the United States Army did not either." (July 16, 1973) The military command thus is blamed for conducting the war only half-hearted. This view was also widely held in American society which regarded the soldiers as victims of a government 'who would not let them win.' The *Guardian* also emphasized the "protest" inherent in the narration. Both images of the combat soldier prevalent in American society, the soldier as morally responsible and autonomous being and the soldier as victim, are to be found in *If I Die*. This ambivalence parallels the difficult situation of veterans in the U.S. of the early 70s.

In Philip Caputo's autobiography *A Rumor of War*, which appeared in 1977, the brutalizing effects of war on the soldiers are one of the major topics. Caputo holds the specific circumstances of warfare in Vietnam responsible for American atrocities. He further blames the political and the military leadership to lie and to misuse the patriotism and sacrifices of the American soldiers in Vietnam. The depiction of the soldier as a victim of war as well as of his own government is paralleled by the reinterpretation of the veterans role in the public view: At the end of the Seventies, the first studies of veterans' war-related psychological problems appeared. The view of the soldier as victimizer receded; rather, the atrocities of American soldiers were made understandable from a psychological perspective. The

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psychologization of the war and the soldiers' experiences is paralleled in the reception of Caputo's book. The reviewer in *Circus Reviews* praises Caputo's book as making the war "psychologically comprehensible to those who can only blame or mourn." He also states that "anyone who still harbors the illusion that Lt. Calley [the platoon leader at My Lai, PF] was a monstrous aberration will find out from Caputo that it's not so. Caputo can testify that the 'collective emotional detonation of men who had been pushed to the extremities of endurance' is [...] inevitable [...]." (June 1, 1977) Similarly, *The New Yorker* wrote that Caputo's "experiences were wider than he had expected – from pity to terror – so that his compassion for every victim, including enemies, was offset by the sort of panicky rage that leads to atrocities." (June 13, 1977) And Peter Prescott in *Newsweek* commented that "Caputo in his memoir [...] is telling us that the Vietnamese experience was, for Americans, much worse than many of us had imagined. [The book] implies that this kind of war [...] batters the average American boy loose from his reason – as well as from whatever moral and spiritual resources he has." (June 13, 1977)

In the late 70s the "collective amnesia" (Herring 264) of American society concerning the war slowly lifted. Ognibene in *The Washington Post Book World* grants Caputo the role of forerunner in this process, similarly to Caputo's self-assigned role as chronicler for the decisive event of his generation. Ognibene states:

We had pushed Vietnam from our collective psyche. But even though few want to talk or think about the war, its specter still haunts us. Rather than confront the flaws in our nation and ourselves which created that inferno, we have looked away or chosen politicians and generals on which to drape the vestments of infamy. Caputo has not. In his powerful book, he does what most of us have yet to do: face the enemy within and overcome the wounds. (June 12, 1977)

Ognibene also demands that American society shares the blame for the "inferno" in Vietnam. Consequently, the veteran is relieved of his role as the only one responsible. Instead, everyone is responsible in his own way for what happened in Vietnam.

Van Devanter's account *Home Before Morning* was published in 1983, one year after the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. was erected. The early 80s saw a reinterpretation of the Vietnam war as a "story of universal victimization"

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(Elshtain 218): Now not only the combat soldiers but also American society was victimized by their own government who had seduced America into a war that was wrong. The design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial confirms the reinterpretation of the soldiers as victims by placing the emphasis on the dead of the Vietnam war. As soon as this notion of the veterans had taken root, their speaking position changed fundamentally. The former 'baby-killers' gained moral authority. The government had been proven to be unworthy of trust. The truth about Vietnam had now to be looked for in the accounts of those who had actually been there. The image of the veterans as authorial voice of the 'truth' of the war is also expressed in the review in the *Desert Sentinel*: "If you read only one work about Vietnam, make it this one [...]" This is the way it was [...]" The reviewer's recommendation to read a book by a nurse who "brings us face to face with the toll that undeclared war took on its combatants" (*Kirkus Reviews*, April 1, 1983) also emphasizes the veterans' image as victims of war rather than victimizers, similarly to the view of the veterans in public discourse of the early Eighties. At this time, the veterans also came to be regarded as survivor-heroes. This view is also present in the *San Francisco Chronicle* review of Van Devanter's autobiography. The reviewer comments: "How Van Devanter survives all of this to become, incredibly, a stronger person for it is what makes the book so riveting." In line with the attempt to overcome American society's factions by reintegrating the Vietnam veterans into society again, the review in *Ms. Magazine* calls it "a healing book."

Winnie Smith's account *American Daughter Gone to War* appeared 1992, one year after the end of the war in the Persian Gulf. From the late Eighties on, American society as a whole saw itself as victimized by the political and social fights of the Sixties for which the conflicts about the Vietnam war served as a catalyst. The Vietnam veterans were easily assimilable in this universal victim construction which placed the guilt on a few politicians and military leaders. While O'Brien had to end his book with the question "Don't I Know You?," Smith knows herself perfectly well. She is no longer the enthusiastic, adventurous, patriotic young woman who went to war, and she knows who is to blame for the loss of parts of her younger self in the Vietnam war. Thus, the question of personal responsibility was finally silenced. The Vietnam veterans now were seen as patriots who gave their all for their fatherland. By

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re-integrating the Vietnam veterans in a common victim identity of American society as a whole and by explicitly honoring them as patriots, Vietnam became “the scar that binds” American society. Linda Bird Franke’s review in *The New York Times Book Review* parallels this view as she states: “Reading *American Daughter Gone to War*, we agonize anew for all the young lives gone to war. The Vietnam wall honors the dead. Winnie Smith’s book honors the war’s crushing cost on the living.” By emphasizing the memorial character of the book, she also underlines the view of the war as now belonging safely to the past, which is a common view after the victory in the Gulf. Similarly, the reviewer in *Booklist* describes *American Daughter Gone to War* as an “often painful, always moving story of people and realities this nation should nor forget.”

The development of the public discourse about the war and the veterans runs parallel to the depiction of the war and the soldiers in my selected autobiographies. The reviews connect the autobiographies with the public discussions about the war and the veterans. The reviewers interpret the autobiographies in the frame of reference the public discourse provides. Thus, the autobiographies become integrated into the development of the war’s and the veterans’ public perception.

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VII. BACK IN THE WORLD – Conclusion³¹⁷

John Updike argues that autobiographical writing is a way to come to terms with the “unbearable” knowledge “that we age and leave behind this litter of dead, unrecoverable selves.” (*Self-Consciousness* 226) Autobiographical writing saves these past selves; “it not only conveniently bridges the gaps between who we were once and who we are today, but it tends as well to make our sense of self in any present moment seem more unified and organized than it possible could be.” (Eakin, *Lives* ix).

For Vietnam veterans, non-fictional narratives – oral history collections, letter collections, and autobiographies – provide the primary media for the presentation of their war experiences. Autobiographies further offer the opportunity to reconstruct the respective veteran’s identity and to integrate the former selves into an unified version of the life, which fits the author’s needs at the time of the autobiographical writing. The relationship between narrating I and experiencing I is especially significant for the interpretation of the identity construction. The varying narrative distance between both selves reflect the degree of integration of or distancing from the former self by the narrating I. The case studies have shown that authors choose from a wide variety of formal and contentual possibilities to construct and represent their respective identity. They use different styles, images, literary modes of presentation, intertexts, or literary traditions to portray their former selves.

Tim O’Brien presents his younger self as a well-read, introspective, reluctant draftee who regards himself as superior to his fellow soldiers. He underlines this image of the experiencing I by the quotes and references to philosophical, religious, and literary texts as well as to characters from popular films. O’Brien constructs his identity in hindsight as ambivalent: on the one hand, he emphasizes the brutalization of the soldiers in Vietnam through the nature and conduct of the war and causally connects the committing of atrocities by American soldiers to the military education in the States. On the other hand, he is aware of his own voluntary complicity in the war he regards not only as morally wrong but as evil.

³¹⁷ I have borrowed the chapter title from Robert Mason’s sequel to *Chickenhawk*, his Vietnam autobiography: *Chickenhawk Back in the World*.

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Philip Caputo's narrative follows the structural patterns of World War I autobiographical narratives. Caputo also uses epigraphs from different writings about war, from the Bible and Shakespeare to Kipling's colonial ballads, and from Roman theorists of war to soldier-poets of the First World War. He thus not only identifies himself as a well-read and educated writer in a distinct tradition, but also places his own experience in a supposedly universal frame of war experiences. Caputo emphasizes primarily the brutalizing force of the special nature of the war of attrition in Vietnam and even of the land itself. Thus, he presents himself primarily as a victim of war. He constructs a distinct narrative distance between the older narrating I and the young, enthusiastic, romantic experiencing I. Eventually, through the sobering and disillusioning war experiences, both voices merge. Caputo finally integrates his war experiences and affirms his former self by presenting his identity as a writer and surrogate sufferer who has to descend into the evils of war to be able to make sense out of the senseless and chaotic war for others.

Lynda Van Devanter presents her younger self as patriotic and idealistic, lured to join the war by Kennedy's speeches and the wish to be of service for her male peers in Vietnam. Through her daily confrontation with death and destruction in the Evacuation Hospitals she is assigned to, she loses her former values and convictions. She becomes a different self: emotionally hardened, bitter, disillusioned, but also aware of her professional skills and capability. After her return to the States, her alienation from family, friends and her pre-war self manifests itself. Therapy finally provides her with the possibility to relate to her former self again as a part of her development that enables her to help other female veterans.

Winnie Smith's narrative presents her development similar to Van Devanter's. But in Smith's narration, the voice of the narrating I is only seldom present. She uses present tense to depict the development of the experiencing I in an immediate fashion. The use of the narrative present can be regarded as a signal for the small distance between narrating and experiencing I; for Smith, her younger self is still present in her life. Although she undergoes a similar development as Van Devanter as a consequence of the permanent confrontation with the massive numbers of

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casualties, she nevertheless maintains her identity as a combat nurse and as a proud Vietnam veteran.

The comparison of O'Brien's and Caputo's narratives on the one hand and Van Devanter's and Smith's on the other has shown that gender is not the most important dividing line in war narratives. Despite different duty stations of male and female soldiers, the war experiences lead to similar results. All four authors describe their process of gradual disillusionment through the confrontation with the experiences in Vietnam. The conduct of the war and the circumstances they have to live in result in a gradual alienation from the values they have affirmed before the war, from the United States' government and the military leaders. Also, they feel distanced from their families and friends in the United States, set apart by their war experiences. They distance themselves from non-participants as well as from the war managers and those soldiers in Vietnam who did not serve under combat conditions. The only group both male and female soldiers feel closely connected to are their fellow soldiers in their respective units. Caputo and the female authors acquired a new social role for themselves after the war: that of the witness who is able and willing to tell the truth about the war. The main division between male and female soldiers occurs concerning sexual relationships: both Van Devanter and Smith tell about sexual harassment by their male peers or superior officers.

The comparison has also revealed that women write about their war experiences similar to their male counterparts concerning structure and style of the narrative. A special kind of *écriture féminine* of women's war writings, "mehrdeutig und widersprüchlich, fragmentarisch mit offenen Strukturen, voller Leerstellen und nicht-realistisch" (Würzbach 146) is not discernible in Van Devanter's and Smith's texts. Rather, they adhere to the conventional structural models of military autobiographies and are similar to the autobiographies of male veterans.

The third part of my study locates the autobiographies in their respective historical and cultural contexts. Reviews of the autobiographies, which appeared in magazines or literary supplements of the well-known daily newspapers serve as the interface for the reception of the autobiographies. As the reviews show, both the public image of the war and the veteran and the depiction of the selves in the

autobiographical narratives proceed in a parallel way. The autobiographies become integrated into the development of the war's and the veterans' public perception

As I have stated in my introduction, autobiographies are wanderers between the worlds of fiction and fact. The analyses give proof to this statement. Not only is the self at the core of the autobiographical narrative "a fictive structure" (Eakin, *Fictions* 5) But all four authors also use paratextual and textual "signposts of fictionality" (Cohn, "Signposts" 109) as means of presentation. Autobiographies have to be regarded as fictionalized constructions of the respective life and the respective selves in the texts. The decisive distinctions from neighboring literary forms like fictional biography or historical novels are the identity of experiencing I, narrating I, and real author, proposed by the identity of their names as well as the autobiography's roots in the verifiable facts of the real author's life. Nevertheless, the categorization of autobiographies as non-fictional texts seems too simplified. They are neither exclusively fictional or factual; rather, they contain elements of both genres. Autobiographies could be regarded as a literary category of their own, located between fiction and non-fiction. A comprehensive theory of the autobiography, which discusses these problems extensively is still to be desired.

The present study can only deal with a small fraction of the autobiographical Vietnam war literature. Nevertheless, the questions proposed in this study and the results achieved in the analyses could serve as a starting point for further investigations. It would be rewarding to integrate autobiographies by members of different ethnic communities, for example by African-American veterans, into the comparison. African-American soldiers regarded themselves as different from their white peers, and sometimes felt they had more in common with the Vietcong than with their white fellow Americans. Analyses of autobiographical writings by African-American veterans, few as they are, would not only give information about the identity constructions of the individual author but could also facilitate conclusions about the self-perception of a considerably large group of American soldiers. Also, the comparison of autobiographies with other more immediate forms of life writings – for example with letters or diaries - could bear fruit for a multi-faceted picture of the war experiences as well as of the self-perception of the soldiers. The comparison could also be used to test the depiction of war and the

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construction of the respective author's identity in the published narratives against those in the private forms of narratives.

The Vietnam war ended nearly thirty years ago. Nevertheless, the war and its aftermath continue to be an important topic for the United States as a nation as well as for the private lives of many Americans. Today, the veterans' experiences are at the center of the public attention for the war. "The World" has finally welcomed the veterans. And many veterans have found their way back into American society. The great number of autobiographical accounts by former Vietnam soldiers testify to the need of many veterans to tell their story and to recover through writing their former selves which had been severed in the war.

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VIII.4. Films and TV Series

Films

Apocalypse Now. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Marlon Brando, Robert Duvall, and Martin Sheen. 1979.

Born on the Fourth of July. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Tom Cruise, Willem Dafoe, and Kyra Sedgwick. 1989.

Braddock: Missing in Action III. Dir. Aaron Norris. Perf. Chuck Norris, Aki Aleong, and Roland Harrah III. 1988

The Bridges at Toko-Ri. Dir. Mark Robson. Perf. William Holden, Grace Kelly, and Fredric March. 1954.

Casualties of War. Dir. Brian De Palma. Perf. Michael J. Fox, Sean Penn, and Don Harvey. 1989.

Cease Fire. Dir. David Nutter. Perf. Don Johnson, Lisa Blount, and Chris Noel. 1985.

Coming Home. Dir. Hal Ashby. Perf. Jane Fonda, Jon Voight, and Bruce Dern. 1978.

Dear America. Dir. Bill Cuturie. Narration by Robert De Niro, Michael J. Fox, Ellen Burstin, Robin Williams et al. 1987.

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The Deer Hunter. Dir. Michael Cimino. Perf. Robert De Niro, John Cazale, John Savage, and Meryl Streep. 1978.

Firefox. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Perf. Clint Eastwood, Freddie Jones, and David Huffman. 1982.

Full Metal Jacket. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Perf. Matthew Modine, Adam Badwin, and Lee Ermey. 1987.

The Green Berets. Dir. John Wayne, Ray Kellog. Perf. John Wayne, David Janssen, and Aldo Ray. 1968.

Guadalcanal Diary. Dir. Lewis Seiler. Perf. Preston Foster, Lloyd Nolan, and Anthony Quinn. 1943.

Hair. Dir. Milos Forman. Perf. John Savage, Treat Williams, and Beverly D'Angelo. 1978.

Hamburger Hill. Dir. John Irvin. Perf. Anthony Barrile, Michael Patrick Boatman, and Don Cheadle. 1987.

Heaven and Earth. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Tommy Lee Jones, Hiep Thi Le, and Joan Chen. 1993.

In Love and War. Dir. Paul Aaron. Perf. Jane Alexander, James Woods, and Haing S. Ngor. 1987

Indo-Chine. Dir. Régis Wargnier. Perf. Catherine Deneuve, Vincent Perez, and Linh Dan Pham. 1992.

Little Big Man. Dir. Arthur Penn. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Faye Dunaway, and Martin Balsam. 1969.

The Lover. Dir. Jean-Jaques Arnaud. Perf. Jane March, Tony Leung, and Arnaud Giovaninetti. 1992.

*M*A*S*H*. Dir. Robert Altman. Perf. Donald Sutherland, Elliot Gould, and Tom Skerritt. 1970.

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Missing in Action. Dir. Joseph Zito. Perf. Chuck Norris, M. Emmet Walsh, and David Tress. 1984.

Missing in Action II: The Beginning. Dir. Lance Hool. Perf. Chuck Norris, Soon-Teck Oh, and Steven Williams. 1985.

More American Graffiti. Dir. B.W.L. Norton. Perf. Candy Clark, Bo Hopkins, and Ron Howard. 1979.

Platoon. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Tom Berenger, Willem Dafoe, and Charlie Sheen. 1986.

Rambo: First Blood. Dir. George P. Cosmatos. Perf. Sylvester Stallone, Richard Crenna, and Charles Napier. 1982.

Rambo: First Blood Part II. Dir. George P. Cosmatos. Perf. Sylvester Stallone, Richard Crenna, and Kurtwood Smith. 1985.

Rambo III. Dir. Peter Macdonald. Perf. Sylvester Stallone, Richard Trenna, and Kurt wood Smith. 1988.

A Rumor of War. Dir. Richard T. Heffron. Perf. Brad Davis, Keith Carradine, and Michael O'Keefe. 1980.

Suspect. Dir. Peter Yates. Perf. Cher, Dennis Quaid, and Liam Neeson. 1987.

The Ugly American. Dir. George H. Eglund. Perf. Marlon Brando, Sandra Church, and Pat Hingle. 1963.

Ulzana's Raid. Dir. Robert Aldrich. Perf. Burt Lancaster, Bruce Davidson, and Jorge Luke. 1972.

When Hell was in Session. Dir. Paul Krasny. Perf. Hal Holbrook, Eva Marie Saint, and Mako. 1979.

Who'll Stop the Rain. Dir. Karel Reisz. Perf. Nick Nolte, Tuesday Weld, and Michael Moriarty. 1978.

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TV Series

China Beach. ABC. 64 episodes, April 1988-July 1991.

*M*A*S*H*. Twentieth-Century-Fox. 251 episodes, September 1972-February 1983.

Tour of Duty. CBS. 60 episodes, September 1987-August 1990.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS
OF VIETNAM VETERANS:
ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Rekonstruktion individueller Identität in autobiographischen Schriften von männlichen und weiblichen Vietnamveteranen anhand ausgewählter Fallstudien. Es geht auch um die Einordnung der Autobiographien in den sich seit dem Ende des Krieges verändernden öffentlichen Diskurs.

Der Prozeß gradueller Desillusionierung und Distanzierung von den vor dem Krieg vertretenen Werten, von Regierung und Gesellschaft, Familie und Freunden verläuft bei Frauen und Männern ähnlich. Der Krieg wird zum lebensgeschichtlichen Bruch. Entfremdung und Isolation nach der Heimkehr stärken den Zusammenhalt der ehemaligen Kriegsteilnehmer untereinander, die beginnen, sich über eine Gruppenidentität als Veteranen zu definieren. Jedoch problematisieren männliche Veteranen stärker ihre eigenen Handlungen im Krieg. Die beiden Veteraninnen, beide Krankenschwestern, kennen diese Problematik nicht. Alle vier Autoren definieren sich als Überlebende und Opfer der verantwortungslosen amerikanischen Regierung. Die Kriegserfahrung und die Probleme der Reintegration in die amerikanische Gesellschaft ermöglicht den Veteranen, eine privilegierte Sprecherposition einzunehmen und Anerkennung als einzig authentische Zeugen und Interpretatoren des Krieges zu beanspruchen.

Die Autobiographien reflektieren den populären Diskurs über den Vietnamkrieg. Sie zeigen die Entwicklung von der Thematisierung der individuellen moralischen Verantwortung in den 70er Jahren hin zur populären Sicht der Vietnamveteranen als moralisch integere Patrioten und Helden zur Zeit des Golfkriegs, verraten von der verantwortungslosen Regierung. Die amerikanische Gesellschaft begriff sich als Opfer der Kämpfe der sechziger Jahre, die wiederum in den Auseinandersetzungen um den Vietnamkrieg ihren Katalysator fanden. Die Frage nach der moralischen Verantwortung des einzelnen war damit hinfällig.

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CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS OF VIETNAM VETERANS:

SUMMARY

My dissertation deals with the question how male and female Vietnam veterans reconstructed their identity in their autobiographical texts. Further, it discusses the integration of the autobiographies into the changing discourse about the war since the 1970s. I choose Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (1973), Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977), Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* (1983) and Winnie Smith's *American Daughter Gone to War* (1992) as my case studies.

The veterans describe a gradual disillusionment and distancing from pre-war values and the American government. The feeling of isolation from American society and their former life, friends and family after the return to the United States strengthens the identification with other veterans. Male veterans, however, deal more with questions of moral integrity and their own role in war. The female veterans, in contrast, who went to Vietnam as nurses, have less need to question their moral integrity. All authors define themselves as survivors and victims of an irresponsible government. The experience of war and the problems of reintegration into American society enables the veterans to take up a privileged position in the discourse about the war. They become the sole authentic witnesses and interpretations of the American war experience.

The autobiographies reflect the popular discourse about the Vietnam war of their time. They show how the focus shifted from individual responsibility to the now-popular view of the Vietnam veterans as morally superior patriots and true heroes of the war who were betrayed by a treacherous government. Thus, the question of individual moral responsibility has become obsolete.

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1989-1996 Studium an der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen in den Fächern Anglistik, Mittlere und Neuere Geschichte und Ethnologie

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